U

WESTERN STORY

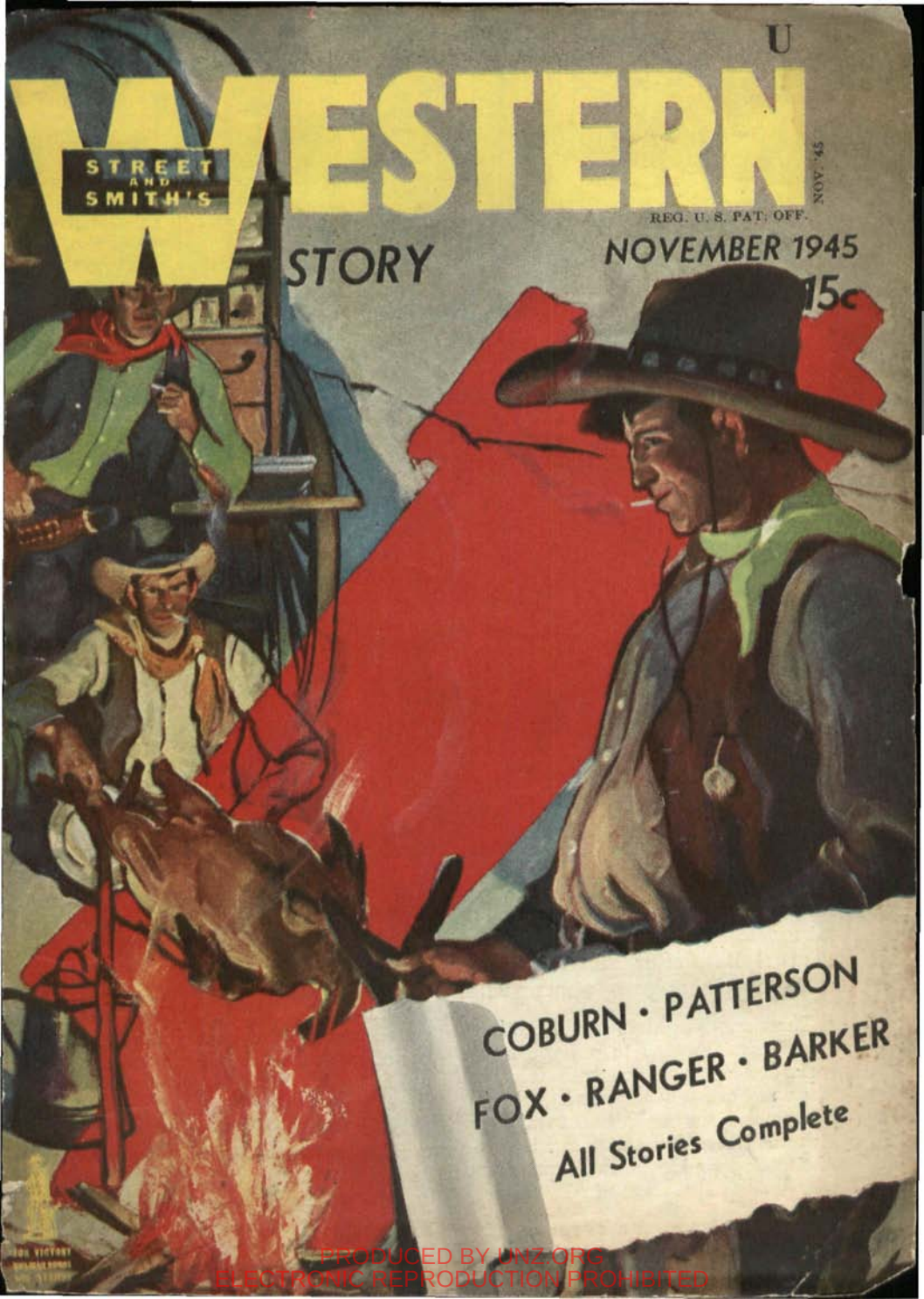
STREET AND SMITH'S

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

NOV. '45

NOVEMBER 1945

15c



COBURN · PATTERSON

FOX · RANGER · BARKER

All Stories Complete

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sure, he was attractive! Sure, his manners were nice! Sure, he was a grand dancer! But, after all, there's one thing* a girl simply won't put up with.

There's nothing like a case of halitosis* (unpleasant breath) to put you in the social dog-house or to cool off a romance. The worst of it is you, yourself, may not know when your breath is that way. Why risk needless offense when Listerine Antiseptic provides such a quick and wholly delightful precaution?

Simply rinse the mouth with Listerine Antiseptic morning and night, and before any date where you wish to be at your best. How it freshens! . . . what a feeling of assurance it gives!

While some cases of halitosis are of systemic origin, most cases, say a number of authorities, are due to the bacterial fermentation of tiny food particles clinging to mouth surfaces. Listerine Antiseptic halts such fermentation, then overcomes the odors fermentation causes. Almost immediately your breath is fresher, sweeter—less likely to offend.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

Before any date . . . LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC *for oral hygiene*

DIGITIZED BY NLM ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HOW'S YOUR { husband's / wife's } I.Q.?

This little quiz lets you decide if you're doing your part to help Uncle Sam hold prices down. No thinking person wants a price inflation like the cruel one we had during and after the last war. That's why we have rationing, ceiling prices and wage controls this time.

		HE	SHE
Does { he / she } buy rationed goods without points?	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐
Does { he / she } pay Black Market prices, forget about ceilings?	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐
Does { he / she } buy a lot of things you don't really need?	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐
Does { he / she } want to cash in a War Bond now and then?	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐
Does { he / she } grab the first things back on the market— *when you could do without them a little longer?*	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐
Does { he / she } believe in spending while the money's coming in easy, *laugh at you for trying to save up for a rainy day?*	*Never*	☐	☐
	Occasionally	☐	☐
	Often	☐	☐

HOW TO SCORE

Never counts 10, *Occasionally* 5, *Often* 0

If your husband's score is:

50 or Over—He's a wonder—hang on to him!

10-30—He's pretty good—steer him a little!

0-10—Get busy, lady—take him in hand!

If your wife's score is:

50 or Over—She's an angel. KISS her!

10-30—A word from you might be in order!

0-10—Only *one* thing to do. SPANK HER!

ONE PERSON CAN START IT!

You give inflation a boost

—when you buy anything you can do without

—when you buy above ceiling or without giving up stamps (Black Market!)

—when you ask more money for your services or the goods you sell.

Save your money. Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to pay for the war and protect your own future. Keep up your insurance.

HELP US WIN

PRICES DOWN

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America

WS—1P

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

NOVEMBER, 1945 VOL. CCXIV, NO. 1

NOVEL

BULLET MARKED, *by Walt Coburn* 6

NOVELETTES

DANGER AT BROKEN BUTTES, *by Rod Patterson* 38

TRAP SCARRED, *by Seth Ranger* 64

THE SILVER SKULL, *by Hapsburg Liebe* 112

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

DUMB—LIKE A FOX, *by George Cory Franklin* 32

BRANDS, *by Nat W. McKelvey* 53

BACK-TRAIL BOOMERANG, *by J. F. Houghton* 57

RANCHMAN'S THANKSGIVING, *by S. Omar Barker* 63

RANGE SAVVY, *by Gene King* 83

DOC COMANCHE'S TROUBLESOME TRAIL, *by Norman A. Fox* 84

PUZZLE 94

DEVIL'S SMOKE AND SIX-GUNS, *by William J. Glynn* 95

MINES AND MINING, *by John A. Thompson* . . 106

GUNS AND GUNNERS, *by Captain Philip B. Sharpe* 108

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE, *by John North* 110

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Publication issued monthly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Gerald H. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Secretary. Copyright 1945, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Re-entered as Second-class Matter, February 3, 1944, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.50 per year; to Countries in Pan American Union, $1.75 per year; elsewhere, $2.25 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in [illegible] to the U. S. A. 15c per Copy

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

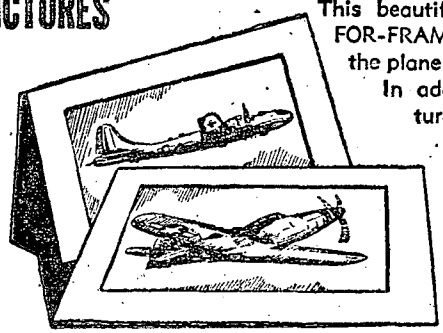
REPEAT PERFORMANCE!

FREE!

AIR TRAILS SPECTACULAR SERIES OF FULL-COLOR PICTURES

Once more, AIR TRAILS leads off with a unique offer: a full series of ten beautiful 13½ x 22 color pictures of modern planes . . . to complete the set offered last year.

AND THESE ARE ALL NEW . . . ALL THE MOST MODERN TYPES OF AIRCRAFT!



This beautiful set includes first READY-FOR-FRAMING color pictures of the B-29, the plane that every one is talking about. In addition, you get full color pictures of the King Cobra, the Douglas Dauntless, the De Havilland Mosquito, the North American Mitchell, the Douglas Havoc, the Supermarine Spitfire, the Grumman Hellcat, and the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt!

All yours . . . FREE . . . with a year's subscription to the leading aviation magazine, AIR TRAILS PICTORIAL!

AIR TRAILS
Pictorial

There are only a few of these sets . . . so don't let the scarcity leave you without *yours.* Fill in the coupon now!

AIR TRAILS PICTORIAL
Dept. 2, 122 East 42nd Street
New York 17, New York

Please send me a year's subscription to AIR TRAILS PICTORIAL, plus the new ten color pictures, for which I enclose $2.50. This offer good only in U. S. and when sent direct to publisher.

Name .....

Address ..... District Number .....

City ..... State .....

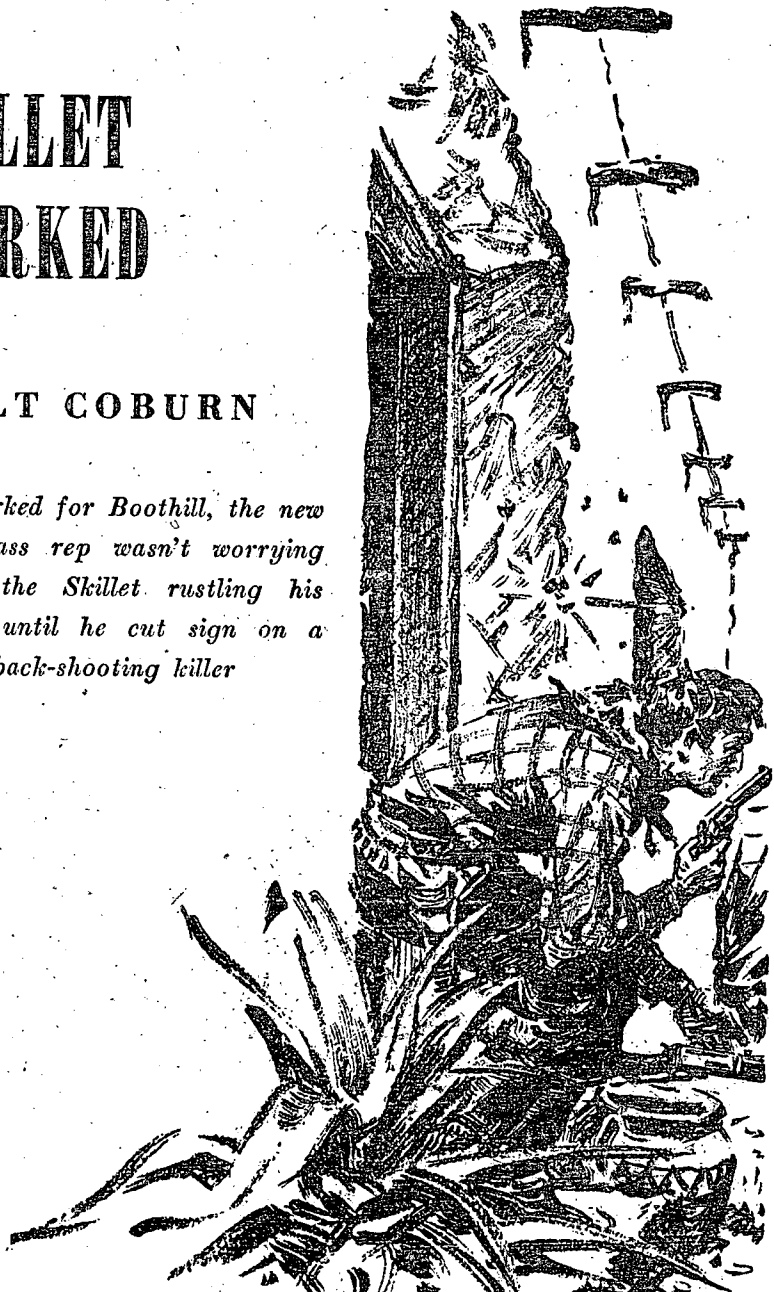
PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BULLET MARKED

by

WALT COBURN

Earmarked for Boothill, the new Wineglass rep wasn't worrying about the Skillet rustling his strays until he cut sign on a back-shooting killer



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I

THE roundup was starting tomorrow. Cowpunchers were drifting in to the Skillet headquarters ranch hunting jobs, and some of the regular Skillet brushpopper cowhands were sifting in to the home ranch from remote range-branding camps back in the mountains. Those who had gone to town for a few days' spree before the long hard roundup grind began were returning with partly emptied town bottles that they were passing around.

The Skillet was one of Arizona's big cow outfits and owned by a meat-packing company that had ranches scattered from Canada to Mexico and one outfit down in the Argentine. Big Ed Jester ramrodded the Arizona Skillet and for two years running he had dragged down the fat bonus the company paid the ramrod who managed his outfit with the most economy and biggest profit. It was an open secret that the company didn't much give a damn about the ways and means used by their ramrod bosses to get results. Big spreads like that can afford to have a blind side. And Big Ed Jester could wink at some of the rules and regulations, such as no liquor or gambling allowed on the ranch or around the roundup or range-branding camps.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ed Jester was a two-hundred-pound six-footer with coarse straight black hair and a clipped mustache. Swarthy-skinned and hawk-beaked, he had a long jaw that made his grin look wolfish when he bared his white teeth. A pair of hard yellow eyes were set under black brows that met in a tuft above the high bridge of his nose. His mouth was a flat-lipped gash. His outfit fed good and the Skillet had a remuda of top horses. The Skillet paid good wages and Ed Jester never kept a man who wasn't worth twice his wages. The Arizona Skillet was a tough outfit to work for. Big Ed Jester was a ruthless, slave-driver type of ramrod. But he could outride, outrope, outfight and outwork any man in his outfit—or so he claimed and that claim was always wide open for challenge.

Not that Big Ed Jester was a braggart, because he was more shut-mouthed than most men. In his own wolfish way he had built up his tough rep. Some of his many enemies claimed that Big Ed Jester hired Windy Gibson to do his bragging and spur jingling, the way a man might hire himself and his outfit a press agent.

Windy Gibson was a grizzled man with sweat-matted gray hair and a drooping tobacco-stained gray mustache. He was short-statured and leathery-skinned with a pair of eyes as cold as blue-green ice that peered out from under heavy shaggy brows. His legs were saddle warped and his voice had a creaky sound. Drunk or sober, Windy Gibson told it scary and while some of his big windies were colored vividly with exaggeration, where there's smoke there must be a little fire and about the time you thought you had Windy Gibson tangled up in an outrageous lie, he would produce some indelible proof to back up at least a part of it.

The tow-headed Cullen Kid who rode the Skillet rough string had a bad habit of egging the grizzled Windy Gibson on in his yarning. A sort of tongue-in-check baiting. And older hands said that mebbyso Windy Gibson sort of liked the Kid's hoorawing but that most mebby the old warthog hated the Cullen Kid's guts and one of these times that loud-mouthed young bronc peeler would prod old Windy when he was in an ornery humor and the Cullen Kid would wake up in hell for breakfast.

But the Cullen Kid was tough in his own right. And doing his best to build up a hard rep. True enough, he was one of the best bronc riders in the cow country and any man who rode the Skillet rough string had to be more than good. When a bronc was too salty, the Cullen Kid hobbled his stirrups and rode that bronc, regardless.

Nobody could possibly like the Cullen Kid. He had too many disagreeable traits. He was too mouthy for his twenty-one or twenty-two years. He was always listening in on private talk. And a lot of what he heard he carried straight to Big Ed Jester and more than likely when he told it to the big ramrod, he spiced it a bit with his own special seasoning. Cornered, the Cul-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

len Kid would lie his way out of it somehow. Then he'd wait his time and, when the sign was right, he would even the score with compound interest. He was sneaky and treacherous and he packed a knife.

The Cullen Kid was tall and slim. Somebody had likened him to a long rawhide whip. His hair was the color of new rope and he had pale-gray eyes with too much bloodshot white showing.

The Cullen Kid did his job of riding the Skillet rough string. And if he drew extra pay for doing dirty chores for Big Ed Jester, then that was strictly between the Kid and Big Ed. Or so Windy Gibson put it.

"And don't never lose track of the fact, Gentle Annies," the grizzled Windy liked to add, "that the Cullen Kid has a sister!"

Concerning Lota Cullen there were two divided opinions. And it would be difficult to choose up sides and get a strictly true vote on who admired her and who were afraid of her, because she had a way of making friends easily and losing them even more quickly. And then the golden-haired Lota would use her long-lashed smoke-gray eyes and her sweetest smile and pick up a broken friendship and cleverly mend it with her shapely hands. Lota Cullen had a woman's wiles and knew all the tricks in the bag. She was beautiful and she had a clever brain. She had to be beautiful and cunning to handle Big Ed Jester the way she did, playing her cat-and-mouse game.

Windy Gibson claimed he once knew Lota's mother well. "She run a high-toned gamblin' house down acrost the Mexican border. Strictly high class. Cheapest poker chip in the house cost five bucks, and I ain't talkin' in pesos. No drunks, no short sports. Beautiful as the picture on a likker wholesaler's calendar, she was. And she played the field till Lee Cullen come along. She could've married the richest cowman in Texas or the biggest politico in Mexico. Men fought and killed one another for her smiles.

"Then when the revolution came the Rebels cleaned her gamblin' house. More'n a million in gold. U.S. gold. And another safe full of jewels. Them Rebels actually cleaned that gamblin' house.

"They taken Diamond Lotus pris'ner. That's what she called herself —Diamond Lotus. And she lived up to it. But the devil in hell only knows what would've become of that gamblin' lady if Lee Cullen hadn't rode up out i' the dark with a bunch of hand-picked border jumpers.

"Captain Lee Cullen, they called him. Cattle rustler till he turned gun runner. Tall an' handsome an' fearless an' dangerous. And because he was furnishin' all the guns an' ammunition to the Rebels, Captain Lee Cullen was writin' his own ticket. When he rode up an' claimed Diamond Lotus, that Rebel leader had to hand her over or lose his supply of guns an' ca'tridges. So Captain Lee Cullen rode acrost the border into Texas with Diamond Lotus and they was married.

"For a few years they was sittin' on top of the world. They had two

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kids. The girl Lota, then the boy they called Clee. Their ranch straddled the Mexican border. The girl was growin' into the livin' image of her mother and before she was sixteen men was fightin' over her. And the boy Clee was ridin' broncs and raisin' hell and he wasn't fifteen.

"But Captain Lee Cullen couldn't stand prosperity. Couldn't set back and take things easy. He had the curse of the itchin' foot. Border politics is dangerous. Twice as dangerous when you play both ends against the middle. The law on both sides closed in. There was a bounty on Lee Cullen's hide in Mexico. The Texas Rangers was after him. They'd dobe-wall Lee Cullen if he stepped south acrost the Mexican border. And a Ranger captain let it out that the big Skillet outfit was sendin' the Rangers after him for cattle rustlin'.

"Lee Cullen sent his wife and kids to El Paso, paid off his cowhands and barricaded himself in his dobe ranchhouse to make his last stand. He had guts. Backed against the wall, he'd go out fightin'. The Mexicans knowed that. The Rangers knowed it. The Ranger captain told me hisself that he hated the job of goin' after Lee Cullen. But he went.

"But the Rangers and the Mexican soldiers was saved the trouble of killin' a brave man. Somebody had beat 'em to the job. Somebody had shot Captain Lee Cullen in the back. There inside his barricaded ranchhouse. Somebody that Lee Cullen must've trusted. Captain Lee Cullen wasn't killed, Gentle Annies. Captain Lee Cullen was murdered—shot in the back!"

"You was talkin' about Lota Cullen's mother," said a Skillet cowhand.

"So I was, mister. If you'll let a man tell it his own fashion. Diamond Lotus had never looked crosseyed at a man till Captain Lee Cullen come along. Then she played it fer keeps. And when she got the bad news she taken it without sheddin' a tear.

"Then Diamond Lotus put her two half-growed young uns in a private school, kissed 'em good-by. An' disappeared. She showed up at the Texas Ranger headquarters wearin' cowpuncher clothes and packin' Lee Cullen's six-shooter. She talked to Captain Clyde Morrow of the Rangers, thanked him for what he could tell her and rode on. Alone . . .

"Diamond Lotus crossed the border. She had a talk with the Jefe of Chihuahua. Thanked him and rode away on the big palomino geldin' he gave her. All alone.

"I was at the Skillet headquarters ranch in Texas when Diamond Lotus Cullen rode up on that big palomino. The horse was ga'nt and old sweat had dried on his buckskin hide. I taken her horse and watched her walk into the ranchhouse office.

"Jess Fears was ramroddin' the Texas Skillet. He was big and tough and handsome. Big enough to make a good target but not tough enough to stop a half-dozen .45 slugs. And noways handsome enough to fill the boots of Captain Lee Cullen. Big Jess Fears was alone in his office

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when Diamond Lotus Cullen walked in with her dead husband's six-shooter in her hand. She emptied that gun into Jess Fears and walked out again.

"Nobody stopped the lady," Windy Gibson told his listeners. "Nary a man lifted hand ner voice to halt her. When she told me to throw her saddle on the best Skillet horse in the barn, I done so. And we stood there with our hats in our hands and we watched that lady ride away. Because there wasn't a man amongst 'em had the guts to stop her. And me, I knowed Diamond Lotus Cullen had killed the right man. . . ."

Windy Gibson, squatted on his hunkers on the ground, looked up from under the slanted brim of his battered old sweat-marked hat as Big Ed Jester strode up.

"What ever become of Diamond Lotus?" asked a Skillet cowpuncher, breaking a silence.

"*Quien sabe?* Who knows fer sure? Some claim she killed herself. There's a story that she went into a convent and become a nun. Nobody knows. Not even the bronc-fightin' Cullen Kid. Mebbyso not even Lota Cullen who owns an' runs the Keno gamblin' house at San Marcos below here on the Arizona-Mexico border."

Windy Gibson rolled and lit a cigarette. He got to his feet, pointing.

"Yonder," he said in his creaky voice, "comes some outfit's rep. Looks like a string of Wineglass ponies he's hazin' along. But he rides like a rank stranger."

II

The Cullen Kid walked out and around from behind the high twisted-mesquite corral. There was a thin-lipped grin on his beardless tanned face but his eyes were thin slivers of pale-gray ice. A bottle stuck out of the deep pocket of his brush-scarred leather chaps. The Cullen Kid had been in town the past week.

"His name is Will Morrow." The Cullen Kid nodded towards the rep who had dropped his string of horses with the remuda and was riding towards them leading a roan Mexican mule that packed his tarp-covered bed. I met up with him at the Keno. He was splittin' a quart of champagne with my sister Lota. Will Morrow come all the way from Texas to buy the Wineglass remnants."

The Cullen Kid's bloodshot pale-gray eyes cut a covert, meaning look at Big Ed Jester.

"Let's go on to the house, Kid," said the big Skillet ramrod. "Leave that bottle of rotgut with Windy Gibson. I'll give you a swaller of real likker to take the taste of that panther juice out o' your bif mouth. Come along." Big Ed Jester's voice was a quiet drawl, but his yellow eyes were agate and he was giving an order, not an invitation.

The Cullen Kid's thin grin twisted. He handed his bottle to Windy Gibson and walked on towards the adobe ranchhouse with Big Ed Jester.

Windy Gibson held the quart up against the light to measure its contents. It wasn't rotgut. It was ten-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

year-old bonded bourbon. The Keno's private stock.

"I wonder," mused Windy Gibson aloud, as he pulled the cork, "how long the Cullen Kid was standin' there behind the corral listenin'?"

He had the uncorked bottle in his gnarled hand and halfway to his mustached mouth when the Wineglass rep rode up. Then the grizzled tough old Windy Gibson carefully wiped the neck of the bottle on his shirt and offered it to the stranger.

"Welcome," creaked Windy Gibson, "to the Skillet, stranger. Drink hearty."

Will Morrow was neither big nor tall. He rode a medium stirrup. But his thighs were saddle-muscled and he was lean-bellied. His shoulders were broad, the muscles filling his flannel shirt and tightening the faded blue denim of his short cowpuncher brush jacket. His sweat-marked Stetson slanted on thick wiry black hair. He had a square, blunt-jawed, short-nosed weathered face and his wide square-cornered mouth grinned easily. His gray-blue eyes were puckered at the corners and set wide apart under level black brows. There was a white-ridged knife scar along one lean cheek. He grinned faintly and when he reached down a short-fingered muscular gloved hand for the proffered bottle, his eyes looked straight into the hard blue-green eyes of the grizzled Windy.

"I reckon," he said in a Texan drawl, "I have the honor of drinkin' with none other than Windy Gibson."

"That's right, mister."

"My name is Morrow. Will Morrow. You might've known my daddy, Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers."

"I knowed Captain Clyde Morrow well, young feller. Knowed you, too, when you was a li'l' ol' button. You're strayed from your Texas range, young Will Morrow."

"Outgrowed Texas," explained Will Morrow. "I made a dicker for the Wineglass. Didn't get much but a dobe shack and the remnants of some off-colored Mexican-lookin' cattle. And a little remuda of good horses. I'm reppin' for my own Wineglass iron, such as it amounts to." He lifted the bottle. "Here's howdy, Windy Gibson."

"Drink hearty, Will Morrow."

Will Morrow handed back the bottle and stepped off. As he unsaddled and slid his bed from the pack mule, he said he reckoned he had better make himself known to the Skillet ramrod.

"You'll find Big Ed Jester at the main house," Windy told him. "He's givin' the Cullen Kid a drink of talkin' likker."

Will Morrow grinned faintly as he unbuckled his chaps. He told Windy Gibson and the other Skillet cowhands there was an unopened bottle of the Keno private stock in his war sack and to use it like they owned it. He had a cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled around his middle and he hitched up the sagging belt as he headed for the ranchhouse.

Windy Gibson stared thoughtfully after the Texan, scowling a little. Then a faint grin twitched the droop-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing ends of his tobacco-stained gray mustache.

There were times when Windy Gibson could shut up like a closed door. He chose to remain silent now and there was something ominous about the old windjammer's very silence that was more voluble than words.

The other cowpunchers eyed the old hellion. But none of them had the temerity to ask any questions. They had all listened, interested, amused, half-incredulous, to his story of Captain Lee Cullen and Diamond Lotus and the killing of a Texas Skillet ramrod named Big Jess Fears. There had been a legendary tang to the tale. He had made mention of a Texas Ranger captain named Clyde Morrow. And the listeners had taken it all with a grain of salt. And then, as it so often happened, proof or part-proof of one of Windy Gibson's yarns showed up like a white rabbit out of a mountebank magician's high silk hat. And they hung around, silent, eying old Windy, hoping he'd enlarge on his tale and enjoy his yarn spinner's triumph.

But Windy Gibson said nothing, though he seemed to be vastly enjoying his moment. Then he handed the gift bottle of the Cullen Kid to the nearest man. And carelessly, almost too carelessly, walked towards the house where Will Morrow had just entered by way of an open door.

III

Big Ed Jester had led the way from the corrals to the house but when he got there, he shoved open the door and motioned the Cullen Kid in ahead. It was no gesture of politeness. The simple fact was that Jester, like most other white men, had a loathing sort of fear for a knife man. And the Cullen Kid's knife in particular.

The tall, slim, towheaded Kid grinned faintly as he walked through the doorway. He enjoyed the fear he could put into the heart of even a big tough hombre like Ed Jester.

The big ramrod set a bottle of tequila on the round-topped cloth-covered poker table that served as a desk when the Skillet ramrod had need of one. His yellow eyes glittered like some big animal's.

"There's your booze, Kid."

Tequila was a potent Mexican drink and a few Americans along the border drank it in preference to the poor grade of whiskey served at the border saloons. But this was not even a good brand of tequila.

"And you horsed me into givin' away a bottle of good bonded likker." The Cullen Kid's grin thinned to a snarl. "What's the idea, Jester?"

"You've had enough to drink. That's the idee. Pour this tequila in on top of the town booze you bin swillin' for a week and you'll be sicker'n a poisoned coyote. Have at it if you feel lucky."

"Look here, Jester. You can't treat a man like he—"

"You ain't a man. I told you to git back here in two days at the outside. You bin gone a week. And when you do show up you're drunk and slobberin' some nonsense about a Texan named Morrow buyin' the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could slash and stab and rip with tricky speed, or throw a knife with deadly aim at the shorter distances.

Big Ed Jester let go. He was breathing heavily. The Cullen Kid laughed flatly but there was fear in his bloodshot pale eyes. The big ramrod's hand was gripping a six-shooter. He'd drawn it with the same smooth speed with which the Cullen Kid had filled his hand with a knife. And they glared at each other with hatred in their slitted eyes.

"Mebbyso," drawled a Texan voice from the doorway, "I better come back later on."

Wineglass remnants and buyin' champagne for Lota—"

"The champagne was on the Keno." The Cullen Kid's grin taunted the big ramrod. "Compliments of Lota."

Big Ed Jester's face darkened. He reached out and grabbed the front of the Cullen Kid's somewhat soiled and liquor-spotted flannel town shirt. His other fist was doubled and cocked and his yellow eyes were glassy with fury.

"Let go, Jester." The Cullen Kid's sweat-beaded face whitened. His voice was a snarl. "Or I'll cut you loose."

The knife in the Cullen Kid's hand was a dirk with a blade about five inches long, its double edges whetted and honed to razor keenness and the point sharp as a harness awl. He carried it concealed and a man never knew where to watch for it. Or he might even carry a matched pair of those black ebony-handled dirks. And the bronc-riding Cullen Kid

Will Morrow stood in the doorway, a faint grin on his wide mouth as the sound of his voice whirled Big Ed Jester and the Cullen Kid around. And now it was the Wineglass rep who faced the deadly menace of both knife and gun. But if there was fear in him, it didn't show in his face. Nor did he make the mistake of getting panicky and going for his gun. As a matter of fact, he seemed to ignore the Kid's dirk knife and Jester's six-shooter.

"I'm reppin' for my own Wineglass iron," Will Morrow's voice was quiet, "providin' it's all right with you if I work with your roundup a week or two."

The Cullen Kid's knife slid out of sight. Big Ed Jester shoved his six-shooter back into its holster.

"We was playin'," the Cullen Kid was breathing hard, "a little game."

"It come up," Big Ed Jester's pale yellow eyes challenged the Wineglass rep boldly, "while we was talkin' about you."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I see."

"Mebby you do," said Jester, "at that. Your name is Morrow, the Kid tells me. And you come from Texas. And the Keno buys you champagne. The last man who owned the Wineglass got to bellyachin' about a disputed brand. He died of what Windy Gibson calls an overdose of lead poison. Might be a good idee, Mister Wineglass Morrow from Texas, if you was to spread your cards face up. I want a look at your hole card."

"Sounds a little like fight talk, mister," said Will Morrow, but he made no gun move.

"Call it what you want to."

Will Morrow heard the jingle of spurs coming up behind him. A cold shiver ran along his spine. Something that felt like a gun muzzle poked him in the small of the back and Windy Gibson's voice creaked in his ears.

"Better check the deal to ol' Windy, Jester. You gummed the cards. Call 'er a misdeal and we'll start over with a new deck. Keep 'er peaceful. This is a cow outfit, gents, not a bloody battleground. There's times when I itch with the hankerin' to git me a big sack needle and whang leather string and sew up the mouth of that Cullen Kid. . . . Jester, shake hands with Will Morrow from Texas. His daddy was Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers. . . . I said shake hands!"

It very seldom happened. But when it did, it seemed to lend some truth to the dim rumor that the grizzled Windy Gibson was the real ramrod of the big Skillet outfit. And that when he chose to crack the whip, Big Ed Jester jumped.

It happened now. Jester's face was dark and his heavy black brows were pulled into a scowl that pinched out the tuft of black hair above the high bridge of his hawk-beaked nose. His teeth bared in a flat grin that was far from friendly but his right hand came slowly away from his gun and he shoved it at the Texan.

Will Morrow grinned lopsidedly and gripped Jester's hand. The Cullen Kid leaned his slim shoulders against the wall and reached in his shirt pocket for cigarette makings.

Windy Gibson removed his gnarled forefinger from the small part of Will Morrow's back and met the Texan's eyes with a leathery grin that twitched his tobacco-stained mustache. He poked his blunt finger in the Wineglass rep's ribs and wriggled his thumb, his creaky voice chuckling.

"When I pull a gun," said Windy Gibson, "I use it. If that tequila is fit to drink, Jester, pull the cork and we'll have a medicine talk. Peel your back off that wall, Kid; nobody's goin' to shoot a hole in it. Kick the door shut. And keep your mouth shut too!"

Eying the grizzled Windy Gibson with something as near respect as he ever showed anybody, the Cullen Kid shut the door. Jester turned to a wall cupboard and brought out a bottle of rye and four small lean whiskey glasses and set them on the table.

"That green tequila would gag anybody but a peon." He filled the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

four glasses and set down the bottle.

"Nary man in this room," creaked Windy Gibson, "and fer once I'll give the Cullen Kid a man's stature, is goin' to show his cards. He'll fight first. Poker is poker. Play 'er thataway. Will Morrow knows what kind of gamblers are sittin' in this game. He's bought in with them few dirty white chips that's the Wineglass remnants. With Jester dealin' and the Cullen Kid a-cappin' for the game and Windy Gibson mebbyso holdin' better'n aces, it don't look like Will Morrow has a sheepherder's chance for his taw.

"But on the other hand I've seen a man buy in cheap and play 'em close to his belly and build up his stack, and when he kicks back his chair he quits the game with all the chips in the big jackpot.

"It takes a man with brains and guts, though. It does, fer a fact. Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers was such a man. And he was about to rake in the jackpot when somebody shot him in the back. . . . That right, young Will Morrow?"

"That's right," said Will Morrow quietly. His puckered eyes watched the three others.

"Now it looks like Captain Clyde Morrow's only son Will might've picked up his dead daddy's hand and aims to play them same cards. That right, Will?"

"Yes, sir," answered Morrow. "That's about right."

Windy Gibson picked up his drink. "Them's Will Morrow's cards, Jester. Spread out fer you to see. All but his hole card. He's got the poker player's right and privilege to keep his hole card buried till he figgers the sign is right to flip 'er over on her back. And the Skillet men sittin' in the game reserve that same rightful privilege. Now tuck in your damned shirt tails and hoist your drinks. This Wineglass rep stays on with the Skillet roundup. Drink up, gents."

It was good whiskey. But it had a bitter sort of taste in the mouth of Will Morrow. The finest liquor on earth would have had the same bitterness unless you were a man so calloused that you could enjoy the taste of it when you drank to your own death.

Which was certainly what the grizzled tough old Windy Gibson was driving at. The same idea was reflected mockingly in the hard yellow eyes of the Skillet ramrod Jester and it was stamped on the lean face of the Cullen Kid.

Clever as sin, old Windy Gibson. Preventing a gun play here at the Skillet headquarters ranch with too many uncertain witnesses out yonder who might tell it in court that the new owner of the Wineglass outfit had been coaxed and prodded into a gun trap and murdered.

Not only that. Windy Gibson wanted a look at Will Morrow's hole card before he killed the son of the murdered Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers. That hard-bitten old renegade wasn't killing Will Morrow—yet. Nor was he going to let the quick-triggered Jester or the drunken knife-slinging Cullen Kid do any such killing. Not yet. Because the sign wasn't right. Windy

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gibson had to make Will Morrow spread all his cards face up first. All of 'em. Then the shooting would start.

Until then, it was a poker game. And while Windy Gibson had been so cunning about spreading out Will Morrow's cards for Jester and the Cullen Kid to read, the old rascal had also been foxy enough never to let the son of Captain Clyde Morrow get so much as a peeking glimpse of one corner of a Skillet-marked card. And they were marked. Bullet-marked.

IV

Will Morrow knew something of the cards from their bullet-scarred markings. And Lota Cullen had tipped over a card or two for him to look at.

Lota had done that deliberately, without being asked or coaxed or tricked in any manner. And then she had her bartender open a bottle of real champagne. She had handed Will Morrow a filled glass, touched its brimming rim with hers.

"Let the dead bury the dead, Will Morrow." Her eyes, deep pools of shadowed gray light under heavy lashes, had darkened.

"You don't believe that, Lota. That wasn't your mother's code. It can't be her daughter's. Remember we're Texans."

They drank on that. And Lota Cullen, looking very beautiful with her dark golden hair and dark smoke-gray eyes, had given him one of her rare smiles.

"Your father," Lota's throaty husky voice had been vibrant, low-toned, "was my mother's friend. That puts me in your debt forever and gives you a friendship and loyalty no other man on earth can ever claim. It's in the name of that friendship that I ask you this favor. Go back to Texas, Will Morrow. Now. To-night."

Will Morrow had shaken his head, setting down his empty wine glass. But Lota would not let things rest there.

"If I left all this, Will, and went with you. Would you go?"

Will Morrow had felt the color drain from his face. Felt the very strength sapped from his legs and his belly empty and cold inside and his heart pounding the blood into his throat so that he could not find his voice. Lota's hand, gripping his, was cool and then it warmed in his and when he looked into her eyes, they were almost black and he had the sensation of looking into a deep dark lake that had no bottom. He wouldn't let himself believe it and refused to drown himself in their shadowed depths.

"You can't mean that, Lota. You don't even know me."

"Did my mother know the man she gave her heart and soul and life to keep forever?"

"I came here," he had told her, "following a cold trail. I came to track down and kill the man or the men who murdered my father. If I quit now, I couldn't live with myself for very long. I'd be better off dead. And you'd be sacrificing yourself to save the life or lives of somebody. You'd sicken of your part of the deal. You'd sicken and die. And

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd do something to wreck both our lives. A deal like that is no good, Lota. You can't build anything that'll stand on a rotten foundation. I've got to pay off the debt of Captain Clyde Morrow."

He had tried to let go of Lota Cullen's hand. But she kept hold of his and her slim fingers were as cold as ice. Her dark eyes were misted and her full red lips quivered.

"You win," Lota's voice was a throaty whisper. "And you're right, Will. We'd be tied forever by a horrible sort of bondage. Even love can't stand that slow poison."

Then she had done a strange thing. They were alone in one of the Kenô's private card rooms. And she had reached across the table and taken both Will's hands and leaned far over the table to kiss him, her lips soft and warm. Then she sank back in her chair with a shaky little laugh. And when he would have gotten out of his chair and gone around the table to take her in his arms she shook her head.

"No, Will. Sit down. Don't spoil something. Let me keep it. And I want you to keep it—just like that. For good luck. We'll both need luck from here on. And from here on, it's you and me. Will Morrow and Lota Cullen. The son of Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers and the daughter of Diamond Lotus and Captain Lee Cullen, a soldier of fortune that ended in misfortune. Pardners. And if that luck should hold, we'll have each other and nothing else and nobody else. It will be a future built on a foundation of revenge that will be stained deep with spilled blood and our only salvation and hope of happiness will be the cleansing prayers of a woman who was called Diamond Lotus. . . . Do I talk in riddles? Or do you understand what I'm saying, Will Morrow?"

"Part of it I can understand, Lota. I'll have to guess at the last part. I don't dare take the risk of askin' a question. Pardners? Does that mean—"

Lota Cullen had gotten to her feet and when Will Morrow was out of his chair, she walked slowly around the table to where he stood and held out her arms towards him. And it was like some dream and he knew he would wake up and realize that it wasn't actually true. But she was in his arms and her lips were warm and yielding against his mouth and she was sobbing softly.

After a while she pushed him back into the heavy barroom arm chair and sat down across the table from him. She was smiling a little, her eyes starry and misted.

"I'm going to tell you what I know, Will. Who and what you're going up against. The odds are stacked. I want you to come back to me. So sit there and listen."

Will Morrow had grinned and nodded. Nothing this side of hell, he told her, could stop him from coming back to her.

"Then listen. First, you've got to know about my brother Clee. The Cullen Kid, they call him. He's half wolf, half coyote. And that makes him all the more dangerous, because the cowardly streak in him turns into

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

treachery. The Cullen Kid is a killer. But he doesn't kill in the open. Clee Cullen is a throwback. So watch him. Don't ever let him get in behind you. Tell him nothing that you don't want repeated to Jester. Got that, Will?"

"I got it, Lota. And I won't lose track of the fact that he's the brother of the girl I love."

"If it's your life or his," said Lota Cullen, "save your live. Beause it belongs to me." The smile was gone from her mouth and from her eyes.

"Jester," she went on, "you'll have to kill. Get it done and over with as quickly as you can. Jester is big and tough and cold-blooded. And unless you're chain lightning with a gun, don't give Jester an even break. Or what you figure is an even break. Because he's tricky. And besides the six-shooter he packs in an open holster, he's never without a second gun. More than one man has been killed by that sneak gun while he was watching the gun in the open holster. Got that, Will?"

"I've got it, Lota." His eyes looked across the poker table into hers and she smiled thinly.

"I know, Will. They'll tell you I'm in love with Jester. That he's in love with me. Let it ride like that. Jealousy won't slow your gun hand in a tight. . . . Now let's get on to Windy Gibson."

"Yeah. The notorious and fabulous Windy Gibson. Is he as tough as he claims to be?" Will Morrow had grinned across the table.

"Tougher." Lota Cullen's voice had become brittle. "Windy Gibson is by far the toughest gun-fighting cowhand who ever drew Skillet pay. And the most mysterious. If ever you pull a gun on Windy Gibson, he'll make you use it. And your trigger finger will be a split-second too slow. Your only earthly chance of killing Windy Gibson is to bushwhack him. Even then you'd better make certain he's not packing a gun. And Windy Gibson is never without a gun. So let him strictly alone, Will."

"Not if he had a hand in murderin' my father. I'll kill Windy Gibson."

"Be certain first, Will, that he had any part of that killing of Captain Clyde Morrow. Be absolutely certain. The best way is to wait till the sign is right. Then ask him. Point-blank. With a cocked gun in your hand and both his hands empty. But go slowly. Because there's the odd chance, Will, that Windy Gibson is on our side. He's on my side, he's proven that. And there's the chance that he's on your side. Don't gamble on it, though, one way or the other. Because Windy Gibson is a man of deep mystery. He's deep, Will. And if ever he offers you his hand, take it. It will mean as much as my kiss."

And that was why Jester's whiskey tasted bitter in the mouth of Will Morrow. And when he set down the empty glass he was watching Windy Gibson and Jester and the Cullen Kid narrowly, his nerves taut, muscles tensed, ready to go out fighting.

Jester was cutting the Cullen Kid some sort of warning look. The tipsy leer on the young bronc rider's face, coupled with the glint of sullen

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

defiance in his bloodshot pale-gray eyes, gave Will Morrow the notion that this blackleg young brother of Lota Cullen was spoiling for trouble of any kind and apt to get out of hand. One wrong word, the slightest little gesture, and this tense silence in the room would explode like a powder blast.

It was the grizzled Windy Gibson who prevented that explosion. And the way he turned the trick proved that the old rascal had a quick, calculating brain and cold nerve in a tight. It was neat and unobtrusive and could have been plain carelessness if all of them didn't know it was done with fast-thinking deliberate intention.

All the tough old Windy Gibson did was put his emptied glass down on the table. But in so doing he stepped in front of Will Morrow and put himself in between the Wineglass rep and the big Skillet ramrod and the drunken knife-packing bronc rider. And while his own wiry body protected the Texan, he thumbed Will Morrow in the ribs and grinned back across his shoulder at Jester and the Cullen Kid.

"I'm ridin' close-herd on Will Morrow," creaked Windy Gibson as he almost tromped on the Texan's spur shanks, "on account of what happened to the last man that owned that Wineglass spread. We can't have the Skillet gittin' a bad name for destroyin' them Wineglass reps, so I'm introducin' him to the Skillet cowhands peaceful and proper. Besides, Will Morrow has a bottle in his war sack to pass amongst 'em. Git along, Will. We'll let Jester and the Cullen Kid swap a few lies."

V

Windy Gibson's way of introducing Will Morrow to the Skillet outfit was perhaps peaceful and proper enough unless you looked for a hidden meaning behind his words.

"This is the Wineglass rep, boys. So treat him accordin'. His name is Will Morrow and he comes from Texas. I knowed his daddy, Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers. You wouldn't be packin' a Ranger commission now, would you, Will?"

"Wouldn't do a man much good in Arizona if he had a Texas Ranger commission, Windy. An old lawbuster with your reputation should know that."

Will Morrow was grinning easily but his eyes were hard and watchful and suspicious. That tough old son of a warthog was certainly tipping his hand to this tough-looking gatherment of Skillet cowhands and the half-dozen reps who eyed the Wineglass man with cold-eyed appraisal. And Will Morrow looked them over with equally penetrating stare.

They didn't like him. Perhaps they had good reason to distrust any stranger who was even remotely connected with the law. Ed Jester had hired himself a hand-picked crew of tough cowhands. Even the cook and horse wrangler packed six-shooters. And there was an indefinable furtiveness about every man who had come to represent other brands on

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Skillet roundup. Will Morrow was a keen-enough judge of men to read what he saw stamped there. And he would gamble on it that the Skillet had either bought off or intimidated every stray man repping with the outfit. They had that coyote way about them. They were too sly and too bold, and they looked guilty as hell.

The bigger part of the range was rugged and brushy, filled with big unbranded mavericks. According to unwritten range law, those mavericks could be legally claimed by the outfit whose range they were found on. But the Skillet would work out beyond its own boundary lines. Skillet men and reps would ride circle and fetch in their drives to the roundup ground which would be within the Skillet boundaries. And Jester would claim all unbranded slick-eared mavericks and put them all in the Skillet iron.

The last owner of the Wineglass had gotten up enough nerve to make a holler about it when the Skillet worked over on the Wineglass range, and Jester had run his Skillet on the hides of what mavericks they had fetched in on the circle that had worked a chunk of Wineglass range. That Wineglass owner had had more guts than brains. Jester had killed him, gut-shot him, and had come clear when tried in court for the killing. You couldn't convict a man when he had every hand in the outfit testify the killing was in self-defense.

The Wineglass had been in debt to the bank so the bank had first claim on the outfit. There had been no legal heirs. Jester hadn't gotten around to buying the Wineglass from the bank because he figured there was no use in paying money for something you could take for nothing. And then Will Morrow had quietly bought the Wineglass. He'd gotten it dirt cheap. It was hardly worth even that low price. Nobody but a rank stranger would have bought the little two-bit spread, not while Jester was whittling on the Wineglass cattle. The bank had lost no time handing the Wineglass over to the stranger from Texas. It had been so comical that Will Morrow had grinned and told the bank men to throw in a bottle of liquor along with it. And the high-collared dudes had done just that.

And Will Morrow told old Windy Gibson and the Skillet cowhands and the half dozen reps that this was the bottle the bank had throwed in for boot when they unloaded the Wineglass on him. He pulled the cork and shoved it at Windy Gibson with a flat grin.

"Better save it," sounded the Cullen Kid's voice, and Will Morrow twisted around to face the tough young bronc fighter who had come up as covertly as some skulking coyote. "Better save it for a brave maker, Morrow. To take the chill out o' your guts when we work your Wineglass range. Or are you donatin' all mav'ricks to the Skillet?"

The Cullen Kid was about half drunk. And here on his own home range with the backing of the Skillet outfit, whiskey brave, he was crowding the issue. The grins he saw

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around him egged him on.

Will Morrow knew what was coming. There was no possible way of avoiding trouble unless he backed down and then he knew that the Cullen Kid would get even more abusive.

There was an easy grin on Will Morrow's face but it belied the hard steely glint in his gray-blue eyes. The grin stayed on his face even as he went into action.

He had a cigarette paper in one hand and a sack of tobacco in the other and he was spilling the flaky tobacco into the paper when he jumped. He gave no warning and he moved fast, crouching, ducking. The swiftly thrown knife slithered past his head with a hissing sound. Tobacco and paper dropped and Will's hands were clenched into hard fists. He was on top of the Cullen Kid and his fists had spatted against the bronc rider's face before the Kid could get his guard up or go for his second knife or gun. They were short, vicious, punishing blows. Bone cracked and the blood spurted and a choked scream of pain and fury was torn from the Cullen Kid's throat.

Will Morrow never gave the Cullen Kid a chance to get balanced. His blows were short, starting from nowhere, with all the power of his shoulders behind each short, savage punch. Rights and lefts rocked the Kid's head from side to side and his pale eyes were glazed. His arms sagged limply. Will Morrow had to grab him by the front of his shirt to keep him from falling. And holding him like that, he cocked his right and let go. It landed with a dull, spatting, sickening sound, like the heavy slap of wet saddle leather. Then he let go and the Cullen Kid dropped like an empty sack and lay limp in the dirt.

Will Morrow was still grinning when he stepped back. He was breathing hard and his eyes cut darting looks around.

Then he saw Windy Gibson standing there, his hand on his gun, his puckered eyes glinting wickedly.

"There ain't a man in this Skillet outfit, Will," sounded Windy Gibson's creaky voice, "that hasn't itched to do just that job. And that goes double fer Jester."

"The only holler anybody's got comin'," agreed a Skillet cowpuncher, "is you don't finish your chores, mister. Tromp his guts out and we'll buy you a drink out o' your Wineglass bottle. Put the boots to the sneakin' young coyote."

Will Morrow rubbed the blood from his skinned knuckles and shook his head. He was watching Jester who stood in the doorway of his office. He had been standing there all the time, hulking big, motionless. Thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt. His right hand too near the butt of his holstered six-shooter.

Windy Gibson looked in that direction and lifted his creaky voice. "Stand your hand, Jester!"

The big Skillet ramrod shrugged his heavy shoulders and went inside, closing the door.

Will Morrow suddenly realized that if he had started to do what that Skillet cowpuncher had so glibly suggested, tromp the unconscious

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cullen Kid, Jester would have shot and killed him and come clear at his trial.

Unless—and Will Morrow cut a hard quick look at the tough old rascal—unless Windy Gibson shot Jester before the big Skillet ramrod had time to pull his gun trigger.

Windy Gibson met Will Morrow's look and winked. It was a quick wink. Nobody else saw it. And maybe it meant something. Anyhow it warmed Will Morrow's insides, for he remembered what Lota Cullen had told him. That if ever Windy Gibson offered his hand, to take it, because it would mean as much as her kiss meant.

The grizzled Windy walked over to where the Cullen Kid lay motionless with his head in a widening puddle of blood. He stared down at the limp form and the battered face and shook his head.

"It's always bin a riddle," he creaked, "how a man like Captain Lee Cullen could sire such a mongrel yellow coyote whelp. . . . Drag 'im out o' sight, boys. If he's alive, lay 'im on his bunk. If he's dead, dig a hole big enough to hold his carcass. But I'm afeared he's too tough to die that easy."

Windy Gibson had picked up the thrown knife. He dropped it on the ground beside the Cullen Kid, then squatted and wiped his gnarled hands on the grass as though touching the dirk knife had somehow dirtied them.

Something of the Skillet men's antagonism had gone but they still eyed Will Morrow with cold suspicion. And he knew that they would kill him if Jester so ordered it.

The Cullen Kid was tough—young and tough as rawhide. He groaned and moved and his bloodshot eyes blinked open as he sat up slowly. Pain was making him dizzy and sick but he gritted his teeth and his eyes found Will Morrow.

"You sidewinder!" The Cullen Kid's voice was a thin, rasping snarl. "I'll make you wish to hell you'd finished the job. . . . I seen you and that sister of mine in the card room. There's a peep hole in the wall. I seen everything and I heard everything. I'm sellin' it for a fancy price. You'll go back to her all right, damn you! I'll rope your dead carcass and drag it down the main street by my saddlehorn. She'll git the chance to cry over your spilled guts out in the dusty street in front of her high-toned Keno joint."

The Cullen Kid picked up his knife and shoved it out of sight under his blood-sodden shirt. Then he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

headed for the house, reeling drunkenly. They saw him shove open the door Jester had closed, stumble inside and slam the door shut behind him.

Windy Gibson's calloused thumb poked Will Morrow in the ribs. The old rascal's voice was barely audible.

"Come along to my cabin, Will."

The others stood aside and Windy Gibson marched along with Will Morrow, piloting him in silence to a small adobe cabin. There were heavy steel bars on the window and the thick plank door was locked. Windy Gibson unlocked the heavy padlock, shoved open the door and motioned Will Morrow inside. Drawn blinds made it almost dark when the door was shut and bolted on the inside.

"Them walls," said Windy Gibson, "is three foot thick. Even if the Cullen Kid was listenin' outside and we was a-hollerin' our heads off, he couldn't ketch a word we said. . . . Set down, Will Morrow. And don't lie. What's the truth concernin' you an' Lota Cullen?"

The cabin was spotlessly clean, ventilated by a corner fireplace. Old Navajo rugs were on the scrubbed pine-board floor and the walls were whitewashed. A heavy homemade table and chairs and built-in bunk were the simple furnishings but there were shelves of books. Good books in limp leather bindings, a big dictionary, an old Bible.

"I hope to make Lota Cullen my wife," said Will Morrow quietly. "She told me she loved me—as I love her. We're playin' for keeps. We both mean all of it."

Windy Gibson nodded. He did not show any surprise. When he spoke it was not a question he voiced but a flat statement.

"You come here to kill the man that killed your father."

"Yes, sir."

This was it. This was the showdown. Windy Gibson was calling for it. And if he was that killer, then one of them, perhaps neither of them, would ever leave this adobe cabin alive.

Will Morrow's six-shooter was in his hand. It clicked to full cock and it was pointed at Windy Gibson's lean belly.

Old Windy Gibson eyed the gun in the younger man's hand and grinned faintly.

"Let the hammer down easy, Will. Put it away. If I was the man who killed Captain Clyde Morrow, you wouldn't be alive. I'd have shot you when you was reachin' for that gun."

Will Morrow's tanned face flushed and he grinned uneasily and put the six-shooter back in the holster.

"That girl Lota," said Windy Gibson; "it's like she was my own daughter. There ain't nothin' on earth I wouldn't do to make her happy. And if she wants you for a husband and you're the man who will live up to the last letter of them bonds of holy matrimony, then I'll see to it that you and her git married. . . . Are you both dead certain that it's the real thing? That you kin stand side by side till death parts you or takes you both? You both studied it from all sides? The tough

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the bad goin', along with this love you feel and the happiness that goes with it?"

Windy Gibson's voice was tense and his eyes looked green in the shadowed gray light and they seemed to search Will Morrow's brain and heart.

Will Morrow returned that searching look without flinching, without anything but a deadly earnestness and sincerity. And he gave the grizzled tough old Windy Gibson a quiet answer.

"We talked it over, sir. We both know what we're doing. We're both old enough to weigh everything. We've both seen plenty of the tough going to know what that can be. We'll be married inside a church by a priest, according to the laws of her religion. It will be as almighty sacred and binding as we kin make it. Neither of us would want it any other way. As binding as life and death."

"Amen," said Windy Gibson.

There in the gray light old Windy Gibson stood and slowly reached out his gnarled hand. Its grip was strong as a steel clamp when Will Morrow took it.

They were gripping hands when the heavy pounding sounded on the door outside. Jester's heavy voice boomed.

"Open up! And come out shootin'!"

VI

Windy Gibson chuckled. It made a grisly sound and had no mirth in it. And there in the dim light inside the adobe cabin his leathery face was a grayish black mask, and out of that mask his eyes were slivers of cold green light.

"That Jester. . . . Plumb lost his head. . . . And when a man gits that bad rattled, he throws away a part of his odds. I kind o' figgered Jester would blow up when he found out he'd lost his holt on Lota Cullen. That's why I didn't make no move to stop her blackleg young scalawag brother from takin' the big ramrod the bad news. . . . Would yuh listen to that big ox beller? Shore gives up head, don't he?"

Somebody was trying to chop the heavy plank door from its bolt and hinges. Jester's raucous voice cursed.

"Sorry loser, ain't he?" Windy Gibson walked over to a gun rack on the wall. There was a rifle, a sawed-off shotgun and a couple of saddle carbines in the rack. He handed one of the saddle guns to Will Morrow and took the other .30-30 carbine for his own use.

"His daddy was the same way, Will. Couldn't stand to lose . . . Jester Fears was his daddy . . . Jess Fears. Jess bein' the short for Jester . . . Well, when Captain Lee Cullen's widder killed Jester Fears, it fell to me to take over the raisin' an' bringin' up of Jester Fears' son, though he was a growed man in size then. And the first thing I had him do was drop the name of Fears. Ed was his middle name. So I told him to call hisself Ed Jester and I put him in charge of the big Skillet trail herd that was startin' acrost the Staked Plains of Texas for the new Skillet range in Arizona. I wanted

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to git him out o' Texas before he got into trouble."

Levering a cartridge into the breech of his saddle carbine, Windy walked towards the door. For a short moment he stood there, grizzled head cocked sideways. The chopping of the ax sounded dully against the double plank door. Windy Gibson reached out with his left hand and pulled out a steel plug shaped like one of the oversized spikes that held the bolt hasp. For a second the light from outside showed through the hole where the long steel plug had been. Then old Windy Gibson shoved the carbine muzzle into the hole and pulled the trigger.

The gun explosion made a muffled crash. Outside a man let out a hoarse scream of agony. The chopping ceased. Windy Gibson slid out the smoking gun barrel and shoved the steel plug into the hole and gave it a twist that locked it into the heavy steel hasp. He levered out the empty shell.

"That damned fool," he chuckled, "should've knowed better. They got orders to stay away from my cabin."

There was a jumble of confused sounds outside. Men shouting, Jester cursing; the Cullen Kid's unpleasant drunken profanity.

There were two windows, steel-barred, curtained. And when Windy Gibson shoved a curtain aside with his gun barrel Will Morrow got a glimpse of heavy wooden shutters.

"Mexican mahogany, same as the door," Windy explained. "Tough as steel. Some feller built this cabin about the time Geronimo and his Apaches was on the prowl. Built 'er solid as a blockhouse. Give a man grub and water and ca'tridges and he kin stand off an army."

Windy Gibson motioned Will Morrow to the other window and pulled out a hardwood wedge about twelve inches long and three inches thick from the big hand-hewn mahogany lower sill. Peephole gun slits. When Will Morrow peered out through his slit he got a panoramic view of a wide strip of the ranch. He saw several Skillet tough hands with carbines. They were circling as though they were surrounding Windy Gibson's adobe cabin. He was crouched there, peering out, when the deafening roar of Windy's saddle carbine made him jump. From outside came a wild yelp of pain. Fear in it. The grizzled Windy took two more swift shots, then slid the heavy wedge into the gun slit.

"Wing yourself two-three-four of them gun-slingers out yonder, Will. Damnit to hell, don't go chicken-hearted. It's them or it's us!"

Will Morrow had no stomach for this kind of shooting but he did as the tough old Windy Gibson told him. There was something about the brittle sound of that creaky voice that demanded unquestioning obedience.

Will Morrow lined his gun sights and pulled the trigger. He levered out the smoking shell and shot three more times. And not one bullet missed its human target. He shot the legs out from under two Skillet men, hit a third in the shoulder, a fourth man in the right arm.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And before he slid the hardwood wedge back into its cunningly fitted gun slit, he enjoyed his brief glimpse of the wild disorder and confusion his fast, accurate shots had caused.

The cabin was filled with the acrid fumes of burnt gunpowder. Will and Windy coughed and fanned the smoke with their hats and breathed a little better when the gunpowder smoke began going up the chimney. Windy Gibson's wicked green eyes glittered through the smoke.

"That damned Jester," Windy Gibson went on, "wanted to be tough like his daddy Jess Fears. So he picked up stray cattle along the way. Put them stolen cattle in the Skillet road iron. Then when Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers held up the Skillet herd to cut back them stolen strays and mebbyso jail this big young tough Jester for cattle rustlin', Jester killed Captain Morrow. He taken two tough Skillet cowhands and set a bushwhacker trap and when Captain Clyde Morrow rode into it, they killed him."

"So that was the way of it." Will Morrow's voice sounded quiet and grim. "Three of 'em."

"Yep. And only one of 'em rode away from the bushwhacker trap alive. Young Jester taken no chances. Them two gents had helped him murder a captain of the Texas Rangers. They taken his orders when they pulled the trigger on their guns. So Jester taken no chances on them two renegades ever testifyin' in court to hang him for murder. He killed his pair of Skillet tough hands and buried 'em there on the edge of the Staked Plains of Texas. And he pointed his Skillet trail herd with the stolen cattle on to Arizona Territory. . . . Yonder Big Ed Jester Fears is your bear meat, Will. But there's no hurry. Take your time about linin' your gun sights. If you're the man your daddy was, you'll want to make an open gun fight of it."

"That," said Will Morrow, "is the only way I want to have it, sir."

"I knowed it. From all reports I git on you, you'll git the job done."

"Reports on me?"

"Shore thing. From the time Clyde Morrow left you an orphan. Who do you reckon had you sent to school and paid your bills an' kept money in your bank account? Even the money you used to buy this Wineglass. Hell's fire, son, it was the least the big Skillet could do for the son of Captain Clyde Morrow of the Texas Rangers. Like I told them Skillet owners, it let 'em off cheap. And you're a mighty good investment."

"I don't get it," said Will Morrow stiffly.

"It ain't hard to savvy, any of it, once you go back far enough. As far back as when Windy Gibson and Lee Cullen and Clyde Morrow and Jester Fears, all young and cockfull of adventure, was left kind o' footloose when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to the Damnyankees. We'd bin in the Confederate cavalry together. And we come to Texas together. And there we kind o' split up, each follerin' his own tastes. Clyde Morrow joined the Rangers. I got the job of peace maker for the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Skillet. Lee Cullen went to Mexico. Jester Fears got the ramrod job at the Skillet headquarters ranch in Texas. And though we split up, we shook hands on a deal. If ever any one of us got into a tight, the others would git there as quick as they could, regardless. And till Jester Fears turned traitor on account of the most beautiful girl any of us had ever laid eyes on, we stuck together and fought back to back against any odds on earth. . . .

"None of us ever figgered we was our brother's keeper. My job taken me wherever the big scattered Skillet outfit had cattle, and I got tangled in their range wars; Clyde was a Ranger captain, Jester Fears was roddin' the Texas Skillet. Then Lee Cullen sent word he needed us. We dropped whatever we was doin' an' met him. And the four of us and no more than us four rode into Mexico and taken Diamond Lotus away from about a thousand Mexican rebels. And we all got drunk at Lee Cullen's weddin'.

"Clyde Morrow was married and had a son. Jester Fears was married and had a boy about the same age as Clyde's son. I was the only one of the four that never married because I figgered no decent woman would want to be tied up to a professional gun-slinger.

"Married or single, regardless of hobbles, picket ropes or hoggin' strings, every damned man of us lost his tough heart and his thick-skulled head when we met the lady who called herself Diamond Lotus. But Jester Fears was the only man amongst the four who went plumb locoed. . . . There's a dictionary on the table. You'll find the page marked where Noah Webster gives the definition of the word 'Lotus'. Read it."

Outside the cabin men were shouting and Jester was barking profane orders. Now and then a gun would crack and a bullet would spat against the hardwood shutters or door or thick adobe walls. But the grizzled Windy Gibson had filled and lighted a corncob pipe and was pouring whiskey into two small glasses.

Will Morrow had to read the definition of Lotus aloud. It was, he read, a fruit eaten by lotus eaters and it made the lotus eaters indolent and turned them into dreamers. Any of several flowering plants represented in ancient Egyptian and Hindu art . . .

"Like dope drugs," explained Windy Gibson. "We none of us, even Lee Cullen who married her, ever knowed who she was or where she come from and mebbyso she didn't know herself. Somebody gave her the name Lotus and later on somebody else called her Diamond Lotus. We never bothered her with questions. Lee Cullen was only one of a thousand men who loved her. But Lee Cullen was the only man on this earth Diamond Lotus ever loved or ever could love.

"Jester Fears should've knowed that. But he went plumb locoed. His pore wife withered and died like a prairie flower fer lack of water an' soil. And Jester Fears forgot his solemn oath. He done his big damndest to set the law of Texas and the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gover-ment of Mexico on Captain Lee Cullen. And when he connivered around and turned the dirty trick, he kept his tracks covered with bellish cunnin' and rode alone to the Cullen ranch. Lee Cullen trusted him, as he'd have trusted Clyde Morrow or Windy Gibson. Lee Cullen let Jester Fears inside the barricaded house. And Jester Fears shot him in the back while Lee Cullen was pourin' out their friendly drinks.

"Lee Cullen was dead when me'n Clyde Morrow got there. Captain Clyde Morrow had resigned from the Rangers rather than go after Captain Lee Cullen. We went there to help Lee Cullen fight, to die with him if it come to that. And we picked up Jester Fears at the Skillet Ranch and he went along with us. When we got there we found Lee Cullen dead, shot in the back. So we buried him and rode back home. Clyde Morrow took back his commission as Ranger captain. I stayed on at the Skillet Ranch. And I watched Diamond Lotus ride up and watched her walk into the office at the Skillet Ranch and shoot Jester Fears six times. And you could have dropped your hat to cover the six bullet holes where them six .45 slugs had tore out the black, locoed, jealous heart of big Jester Fears."

Windy Gibson laid down his gun and picked up the worn leather-covered Bible. He told Will Morrow to put his right hand on the Bible.

"This Bible belonged to Diamond Lotus. She gave it to me when she died of a broken heart in a convent. Put your right hand on it, Will Morrow. And take your solemn oath that you will love, protect and cherish Lota Cullen."

Will Morrow took his solemn oath and Windy Gibson said "Amen."

"I was duty bound, Will," he said quietly, "to look after the two orphans Lee Cullen and Diamond Lotus left behind. Even as I was bound to look after the son of Jester Fears and the son of Clyde Morrow. It ain't bin an easy job. But I've done the best I could. And I let God A'mighty do most of the good work and the devil in hell taken care of his own. The devil's brand is stamped on the big hide of Ed Jester Fears. As for the Cullen Kid, he's somethin' that mebbe even the devil in hell won't want. . . . Now let's take our drink, Will. Then we'll open that door and walk out a-shootin'."

Will Morrow was leaning over to pick up his filled glass when Windy Gibson hit him over the head with the long barrel of a six-shooter.

VII

The sound of gunfire seemed to come from a long way off. Will Morrow fought his way out of black oblivion, his head throbbing with pain. He sat up slowly, shaking his head to clear the pain and dizziness. He was on the floor and the same dark-gray light filled the adobe cabin. Then he heard the shooting and it was just outside the cabin. And suddenly he remembered. Remembered seeing the gun barrel swing down too late to dodge the blow, remembered the look on old Windy Gibson's leathery face.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Will Morrow

Will Morrow got to his feet with a lurch and grabbed up the saddle carbine he'd laid on the table when he reached for his drink. Then he yanked open the heavy door and he was crouched, the carbine gripped in his hands, there in the shadowed doorway, when a bullet whined past his head. And not fifty feet away was the big Skillet ramrod, Ed Jester, a carbine in his big hands. Jester loomed up big and dangerous. Will Morrow could see his white teeth bared like fangs in a wolfish grin, the glitter of his pale yellow eyes in the sunlight.

Will Morrow dropped the carbine and he had Captain Clyde Morrow's six-shooter in his hand when he began shooting. It seemed just then that Jester was as big as all the world and a human target he could not miss, and Will had the uncanny sensation that no bullet ever molded could dent his hide or kill the son of the murdered Clyde Morrow. Because he was Will Morrow and he was the man to whom Lota Cullen had given her heart and her future and her life, and Lota was the daughter of the fabulous and legendary Diamond Lotus and the prayers of the dead Diamond Lotus cloaked him like armor. . . .

He was thumbing back the hammer of the six-shooter and pulling the trigger. He saw a smear of crimson where the white teeth had been bared and a pair of glassy yellow eyes sightless in death, staring out of a scarlet bloody mask. And then Will's gun was empty and smoking in his hand and the dead hulk of Bid Ed Jester Fears lay on the ground and the only sound in the crimson sunset was the echo of his own gun in his ears.

Out of that echo-filled silence sounded the creaky voice of Windy Gibson. It came from almost at Will Morrow's feet. And he looked down like a man in a nightmare and for the first time saw the twisted form of the grizzled Windy Gibson there on the ground a few steps outside the cabin doorway.

"It's up betwixt my shoulder blades, Will—where I can't git at it. Like you git an itchy spot there and you can't reach to scratch it."

Will Morrow knelt and slowly, carefully, pulled out the black-handled dirk that had its sharp double-edged blade buried to the hilt.

He told Windy Gibson to lay there on his belly until he got the knife wound plugged to stop the blood flow. But it wasn't bleeding too much and the tough little old gun fighter was chuckling.

"I might've knowed that treacherous young whelp would be bushed

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up. He must've bin flattened against the outside wall by the door. And when I turned to slam the door shut, he climbed my back and let me have it. . . . I knowed all along that Jester had put a standin' reward on my dead carcass, big enough to make the Kid's mouth water. But the Cullen Kid should've knowed Jester wouldn't pay off no big fifty-thousand-dollar bounty. I seen the flash of Jester's gun from where I laid here on the ground and the Cullen Kid screamed. . . . Ever hear a panther scream? Like a woman bein' tortured to death. Jester's big laugh couldn't drown out the Cullen's Kid's screams till the death rattle choked the Kid off. . . .

"I had to play dead. Play possum. I could feel Jester's yellow eyes a-watchin' me. Watchin' to see if I'd move. I had to set my teeth hard. There was pain. And I kept feelin' dizzy and the sweat broke out and I could feel myself a-bleedin'. And I laid there and waited for a snap shot at Jester. But he was bushed up. Layin' for you to come out. And I knowed you'd come a-chargin' out any seond, because I'd tapped you just hard enough to knock you out. I wanted to keep you on ice till I'd killed Jester for yuh. And I hated the idee of killin' Lee Cullen's son. But I knowed the Cullen Kid had to be killed. . . . I wanted 'em dead so's they couldn't kill you. So's you and Lota . . . . Anyhow, Jester's tough cowhands was quittin' the Skillet like rats desert a doomed ship. They was forkin' their horses and hightailin' it. There ain't a man amongst 'em left here. Only the dead 'uns . . .

"Then out you come. And I never got a chance to grab my gun that had bin knocked out o' my grip when the Cullen Kid jumped my back. . . . I didn't need to worry. Big Ed Jester Fears never had a Chinaman's chance. He had his gun in his hand and he's fast and a dead shot. And you throwed away a saddle gun and pulled a six-shooter and I never seen such shootin' before ner do I ever expect to witness the equal of it. Jester was dead six times before his big carcass hit the ground. I can't savvy it . . ."

"A good woman's prayers, sir," said Will Morrow, "did it."

"Amen to that, son. Now plug that knife hole and let's have that drink you missed. Then we'll fork our town ponies. We'll let the dead bury the dead here till somebody gits out from town. . . . I got a notion Lota will be gittin' kind o' worried, Will . . ."

THE END

The war is over but remember that Uncle Sam still needs all the scrap paper you can salvage—so don't waste *waste paper!*

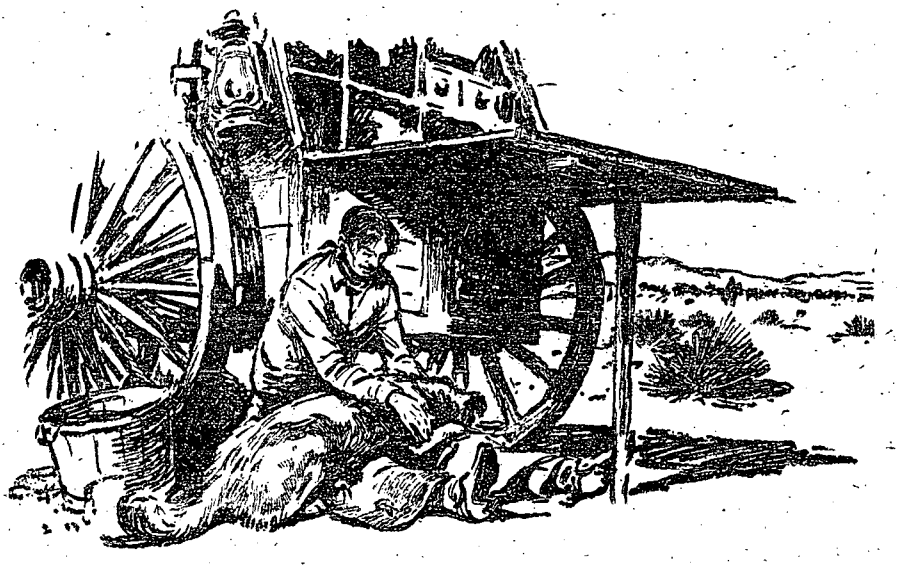
PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DUMB—LIKE A FOX

by

GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Rusty showed what he could do with four-legged wolves but would he be hamstrung by the treachery of the two-legged species?



ANY experienced cowman would have called two strikes on Rusty from the start. Only the fact that Bob Roberts, sixteen-year-old son of Jordan Roberts, was laid up by having a horse step in a hole and was in danger of being crippled for life, saved Rusty from being drowned with the rest of old Flora's pups.

The days seemed pretty long to the boy, sentenced to lie flat on his back while his father was out on the range directing the work of a half-dozen lively cowhands. When Flora sat up with the little gray half-husky puppy in her mouth and begged for Bob to take it, no one could have refused. A few minutes later Jordan Roberts came into the room and saw the furry animal nestled close against Bob's cheek.

"Don't you go getting stuck on that outlaw," he advised. "He's half-husky and I don't want a lot of cows havin' their tails bit off by a savage dog."

"Oh, dad, let me keep him; I can teach him not to bother the cows.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'll make a hunting dog out of him, when I get well."

At the possibility of Bob's being able to take his place with the rough-riding cowboys of the JR connected, a mist came to Roberts' eyes. If Bob could only get well and strong again . . .

From that day Bob began to get better. The responsibility of keeping a lively puppy out of mischief took the boy's mind off his misfortune. The muscles of his legs, being freed from the restraint placed on them by his fears, relaxed and began to straighten.

By the day that Old Doctor Williams told Jordan Roberts that his boy would walk without even a limp, Rusty had grown so rapidly that he was out in the back pasture with his mother learning from her how to drive stubborn cows out of the brush.

Flora was one of the best cow dogs on the Upper Rio Grande and, as Roberts often boasted, better than a man when it came time to bringing cattle out of the brakes and hidden gulches on Crooked Creek. Her method was to slip cautiously behind the animal, watch her chance to nip a heel, and then dodge away before the cow could turn and hook its tormentor.

All the ranches of the foothill country had from one to a half-dozen, black-and-tan shepherd dogs, smart little creatures that knew more about handling cattle than anyone unfamiliar with them would believe. Nearly all of them were natural heelers and picked up their education from watching the older dogs at work. If, as occasionally happened, one got the bad habit of biting the tails of the cattle, it was promptly shot. Nothing affects the appearance of a steer worse than to have the brushy part of his tail bitten off, and a dog caught doing the trick was not given a second chance.

That a dog, who was half-husky, could learn to restrain his natural instinct to tear or even kill was unbelievable. None of the cowboys liked the idea of having Rusty work with Flora, and the JR connected foreman, Deke Slidell, was the dog's open enemy from the first, not because Rusty had shown the slightest tendency to be ferocious, but because Slidell hated young Bob, who would soon know enough about the business to take his father's place on the range. So far Slidell had managed to put over several shady deals without being caught, but for some time before Bob's accident, the quick-witted youth had been asking questions that required a lot of explaining.

Some of the hands had been suspicious that the hole into which Bob's running horse had stepped with both front feet, was not the work of a badger, as Slidell had insisted. Ernest Shaw, who had the next ranch up the river above the JR, went to look at the place where Bob's accident had occurred and said that the hole had been dug by a two-legged badger. Bob had gone up over the trail that morning and it was well known that he would not get back until after dark. He had not noticed the hole when he went up and didn't remember that his horse had shown any nervousness,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but since the men had no way of proving anything, their suspicions were not reported either to Roberts or Bob.

When Bob was able to ride again, Rusty was a huge, gangling, awkward dog twice the size and weight of his devoted mother. The night before, Bob had heard one of the cowboys say that he had to leave a proddy steer over on Spring Creek. It would prove that he was well enough to work again, Bob thought, if he brought the animal in. When he saw the steer grazing in an open space near the trail, he told Flora to bring it out. Flora obeyed quickly and Rusty romped after her.

Bob was amazed at the exhibition of team work put on by the dogs. Flora went to the head and turned the steer toward the open country, Rusty remaining a few yards to one side until he saw that the animal was headed out of the bushes. Then he dashed in, nipped first one heel and then the other, dropping flat on the ground to avoid punishment. This movement was one that Rusty could only have learned from having driven horses, since cattle are unable to kick behind them. Out came a bawling badly frightened steer who had suddenly decided that most any place was better than the cover where he could not see what was going on behind him.

From that day on, Bob spent a good part of his time teaching Rusty to become king of all the cow dogs on that range. Rusty learned not only to drive cattle quietly but to hold them in a bunch when told. He got several bad falls before he was able to balance his body on the hips of a horse behind Bob's saddle.

By the time Rusty was two years old, he was twice as large as any other dog on the river and was Bob's constant companion.

Rusty had become an expert heeler and was frequently sent on hard jobs where the work might be too much for Flora, who was beginning to slow down a little, and, so far as anyone knew, he had never attempted to take a tail hold or bite a cow's nose.

The roundup that fall had been delayed. There was snow on the ground when the men began to force the cattle out of the aspen thickets in which they hid. Because of his keen sense of smell and his instinct for hunting cattle that he could not see, Rusty was proving to be a great help in finding stock that otherwise might have been left behind.

Late one afternoon Rusty scented cattle and started out on his own hook to find them. The side hill, from which the scent came, was heavily wooded and Rusty expected to find the cattle nearby. He began to get nervous at being so far away from any of the JR riders and twice he sent forth a long-drawn-out howl, signaling to Bob to come and help. He did not know that Bob had already gone in to the main herd with the last bunch Rusty had brought out.

Rusty kept on to the top of the ridge and now he understood why the smell had varied in strength. A good-sized herd had crossed this ridge and gone down into another

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

valley. When a gust of wind blew over the ridge it brought the scent; otherwise there was little or none. When he saw the cattle, Rusty sent out his trouble call again and, failing to hear Bob's familiar whistle, went on down into the valley. He had no intention of giving up his find, but he realized that bringing in as large a herd as this alone was going to be quite a job.

Night was coming on, and any of the gentle shepherd dogs would have given up and gone to camp, but Rusty wasn't built that way. He had found the cattle and he was going to take them out. He whined a little at the loneliness as he trotted bravely down into the valley. To make matters worse there were but two cows in the herd, the remainder being high-spirited steers.

This was, by far, the largest herd that Rusty had ever attempted to drive. He was sizing up the situation, when a strange sound came faintly on a gust of wind. The dog's hackles began to raise; he had never heard the call of a wolf pack, but instinct warned him that here was an enemy greater than he had ever met!

One of the mother cows bawled plaintively to the calf that cuddled close to her side. The steers pawed the ground and shook their horns defiantly, but Rusty knew by the scent that they, too, were scared stiff. Instinct in the blood of generations of Rusty's breed caused him to take advantage of the protective coloring of his coat by moving forward a few steps and standing near the brown trunk of a pine. There he froze, rigid as a statue of stone.

The long-drawn howls of the hunters were suddenly changed to sharp, anxious barks, inspired by the eagerness of the wolves to sink their fangs in the tender flesh of their victims and feel hot blood gush across their drooling jaws. They came forward confidently, evidently ignoring the dog smell.

Rusty saw but two wolves, a powerful young dog and a huge bitch, the younger wolves of the pack staying back until they were called to the feast. The male started to cut a calf away from its mother, and this brought Rusty into action. The lobo saw him and stopped quickly. Here was something vastly different from what the wolves had expected. Rusty stood twenty-six inches high at the shoulder and weighed eighty pounds. The wolf was not as big, but was several pounds heavier. He walked slowly toward the dog, snarling viciously. Then the female came up and began circling to Rusty's rear.

Always ready to fight any dog, Rusty had long ago learned to keep a line of retreat open. He had no intention of being caught in such a trap now. Instead of giving the female a chance to slip up behind and hamstring him, he charged her mate, striking a blow on the shoulder with all the power he had. The unexpected attack completely upset the plans of the wolves; they hesitated, each looking to the other for council.

Rusty was quick to take advantage of the moment's delay. His training caused him to react instantly and he started the drive down the gulch in the direction of the main herd. The

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

two cows, anxious to protect their calves, took the lead.

As soon as Rusty saw that a line was forming behind the cows, he began darting back and forth, barking furiously in an attempt to stampede the steers. Once started on a wild run, a whole pack of wolves could not stop them. Several times Rusty risked being trampled to death when he dashed in close to bite the heels of the cattle and make them run. The desperate attack made by the wolves was now helping the dog. Instead of cutting out an individual cow and hamstringing it, as was their usual custom, the lobos could do no more than run along behind, snapping at anything that came within reach. Some tails were cut off completely, others were badly torn.

The female wolf, furious at being denied her prey, ran along the side opposite to where Rusty worked, sprang high and fastened her fangs in the neck of a two-year-old that had not been dehorned. The steer, a particularly lively one, bucked furiously and broke away into the open. Crazed by fear and pain, he dashed headlong into a grove of dead aspen, with such force that the hold of the wolf was broken, and before she could get another chance to spring, the steer turned, caught her in the breast with a stubby horn and ripped her heart out. The sight of his dead mate discouraged the young male, who gave up the chase.

Half an hour later Rusty proudly drove the bunch into the main herd and then trotted to the wagon to find his master Bob.

The men who were holding the roundup made way for Rusty's find, but not until Slidell had seen that three steers had been tailed. Bob was feeding the tired dog his supper when Slidell rode up near the JR wagon, a gun in his hand. "Get to one side," he ordered Bob, "I'm go-in' to kill that damned tailer."

Instead of obeying Slidell's angry demand, Bob crept close to the dog and drew his gun. "Get the hell out of here or I'll gut-shoot you," he warned.

Jordan Roberts and Ernest Shaw, who had been checking up on the number of steers gathered so far, sprang between them.

Slidell appealed to the older Roberts. "I've told you all along that sooner or later that half-husky would start tailing cattle. I ought to have killed him long ago."

Bob got to his feet, his gun still lined on Slidell's belt. "You ain't killin' him, now or ever. Anybody that says Rusty tails cows is a liar."

"All right," Slidell gloated. "Send for Williams. He saw the dog bring in a herd of steers and some of them were short a tail."

"We won't do anything tonight," Jordan Roberts told them. "In the morning, I'll talk to Williams."

At midnight a cowboy came in to call Bob Roberts and Shaw to stand guard. Bob had not slept a wink, but he got his horse and, leaving Rusty asleep at the foot of his bed, rode away with Shaw who apparently had something on his mind too. When the two reached the herd, Shaw called Williams to one side and talked with him, while Bob rode around the herd and back to them.

PRODUCED BY UNI-OBC
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shaw motioned to Bob.

"Williams is going to hold the herd. You come with me," he said.

Dawn had come and most of the men had eaten before Bob returned. He was alone and Rusty knew that Bob was upset about something. The young cowboy hardly stopped to speak to Rusty but went straight to where Jordan Roberts was and told him something that made the older man jump up quickly and take a step toward Slidell.

"Where was you the day that Bob got hurt?" Roberts demanded.

Slidell started to speak, hesitated, then stammered: "Why—I went to town early that morning. I didn't hear about the accident until somebody told me you had phoned for a doctor."

"Did you meet Jim Squires that day?"

"Squires? No. Why should I meet that butcher?"

"Because he says that you hired him to dig a hole in the trail after Bob went up that day. He also says that he's been buyin' cattle from you every fall and that you cut a bunch out for him yesterday and left 'em in a hideout, but that somebody else got 'em. He thinks it was a dog."

"That's all bunk; I don't know Squires at all," Slidell said desperately.

Bob turned toward the woods and beckoned. "You might as well bring Squires and Puffy in, Ernest."

Shaw rode into camp, leading a couple of horses on which two men were bound, and he had something wrapped in his slicker lying across the saddle in front of him. When Rusty caught the scent, he growled and showed his fangs. Shaw dumped a dead wolf on the ground.

"You sure called the turn, Williams," he said. "There's the tailer that tore the hide off your steers. Slidell did leave a herd for these birds to pick up, just as you had it figured."

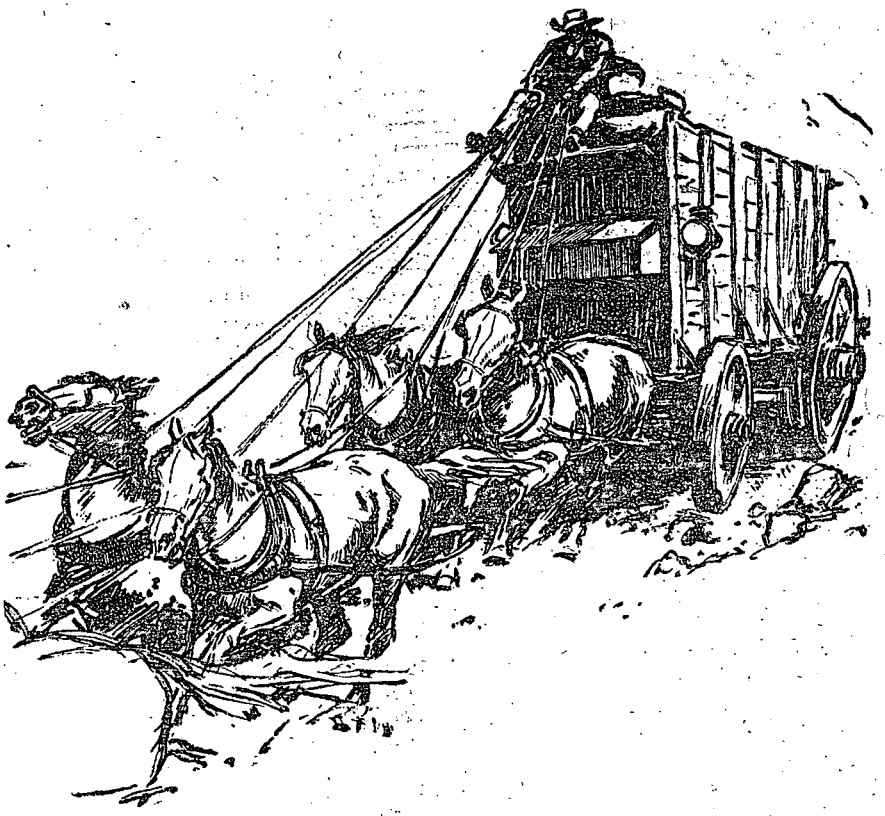
Roberts had taken the guns from Bob and Slidell the night before and had not returned them. Slidell looked around for a weapon, then he saw the camp ax and grabbed it up, holding it high above his shoulder.

Rusty had never attacked a man in his life, but now he was excited. Instinctively the angry talk of the men, the scent of the dead wolf and the threatening action of Slidell were too much for his wild nature. When he saw Slidell swing the ax and start toward Bob, Rusty charged, leaped high to avoid the vicious blow and his teeth sank sharply into Slidell's arm. The ax went reeling into the dust and Slidell suddenly found himself enveloped in a stout rope, manned by Jordan Roberts himself.

As Rusty turned dejectedly away and crept under the chuck wagon, the older man started to speak to his son. But Bob was hunkered down before the wagon. "Come on out, feller," he cried with a grin. "I guess the way we all feel about you now is that you should be wearing a medal. But I know you'd rather take the herd home, pard. Come on out, feller—we need you!"

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

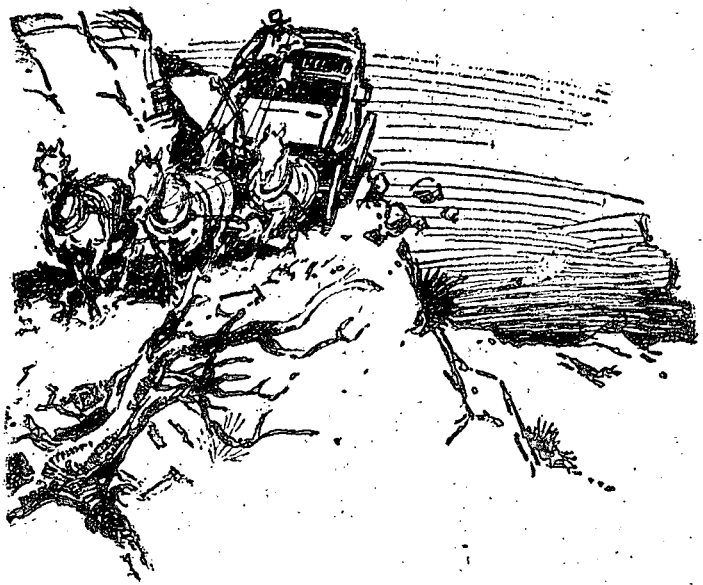


DANGER AT BROKEN BUTTES

by ROD PATTERSON

Was he yellow? It took that slug wagon careening down Hell's End Hill like a juggernaut of destruction to answer that question for Brud Lacey

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



I

BRUD LACEY stood in the little outer office at the end of the passenger ramp of the Sierra Stage Company's main depot at Navasota. He had a certain trepidation on his face, a troubled gravity in his clear blue eyes; and he kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other and staring at the door marked PRIVATE while the moments ran on endlessly.

Sue Stockman, the line's attractive time clerk, glanced up from her desk beyond the pine guard rail and smiled. There was a warmth that was a lot more than casual friendliness on her delicately molded face. Still that expression didn't help to quell the turmoil of worry in Brud's mind, because he was waiting for Dave Boyle, the superintendent, to call him in and he had a pretty good idea what was in Boyle's mind to say to him. Brud had his defense all ready, but still he was uncertain and afraid.

"Good morning, Brud," said the girl. "My, you look as though you'd seen a ghost or something!"

Brud gave a guilty start. "Did the boss say anything to you, Sue? What's he want to see me for?"

"Well, he's upset," Sue answered matter-of-factly, "if that's what you mean. And no wonder. He's just found that there's an Upland Company spy working out of our depot."

Brud stared. "I don't get it," he mumbled. "And, anyway, what've I got to do with Upland?"

"Everybody knows Upland's after our franchise—after the Copper King Mine contract," the girl told him severely. "And all the accidents we've been having—"

PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT LAW
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, that!" Brud was indignant. He wished people would quit referring to *his* accident. It was something he didn't want to talk about, something he wanted to forget. Especially Nate Rambo's part in it. Brud had been driving the Broken Buttes Stage until a month ago when it had happened. Rambo drove a freighter over the same route and had it in for Brud. It was Rambo who had deliberately run him off the trail on Hell's End Hill that night, but Brud had to keep that dark. He'd rather have lost an arm than squeal.

"How's your head feeling?" Sue asked sympathetically.

"All right." He let his fingers go to the spot on his right temple where the three-inch scar was covered by crossed strips of adhesive tape. Concussion, the doc had called it. There'd be some dizziness and quite a bit of pain for a while. Well, he'd been having both for weeks now, and it was getting worse instead of better. That was something else he had to keep dark, or run the risk of Dave Boyle laying him off.

But he could have stood any amount of pain if the dream hadn't persisted in coming back every night: the nightmare clarity of the roaring swoop of Nate Rambo's big dray wagon on the trail. The dream would hold Brud wide-awake, tense and sweating; and it would affect him all the next day like a dragging physical illness. It had tortured him because he'd come to deem it an indication of cowardice deep inside, despite the fact that he hadn't really acted like a coward when the stagecoach teetered on the rim and then had crashed over it. He always drove his two-team string with a casual expertness, and he'd handled the outfit in the same way until Rambo had crowded him over with the heavily loaded slug wagon. There was the grade . . . the collapsing shoulder of the road . . . the darkness . . .

Brud was staring at the office windows, hearing the girl's voice run on and on, yet only half aware of what she was saying. A thin rain was falling on the town, whipped up by a northeast gale. It had been raining like this for three days now, and when the storm really broke, it would be bad. Out in the hills it would be worse that that.

Sue was saying, ". . . you mustn't let it get you down. It could have happened to anybody . . ."

"Yeah," Brud muttered, "it could've happened to anybody—" Then his heart stopped. The door marked PRIVATE opened suddenly before his eyes. Dave Boyle, a huge hulk of a man, square of face and frame, poked his bullet-round head through the opening and beckoned peremptorily.

Brud went in. Boyle nodded to a chair, then sat down in his own behind a flat-topped desk. Brud sat —and waited. He knew better than to disturb the super's silences, and this was one of them. Boyle studied a paper on the desk, a corncob pipe wedged between his teeth, a frown on his broad, sunburned forehead. He looked more like one of his own drivers than the boss of the Sierra Line. There was grease under his

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fingernails, grease on his face and on his clothes. At last he looked at Brud and said: "Out with it, Lacey. What's gone wrong with you?"

Brud sat up straight. He combed strong fingers through his shock of reddish hair. "Why, nothing's wrong," he said, ashamed of the tremor in his voice.

Boyle picked a scrap of paper off his desk, shoved it at Brud who took it wonderingly. "This was found in the locker room," the super growled. "Did you happen to drop it?"

Brud stared at the paper. It was a torn fragment of a pay envelope. Across the top of it was a broken line of printing: UPLAND TRANS— The rest of it was missing.

Brud brought his gaze back to the super's expressionless face. "Never saw it before," he said. He couldn't stop the tide of red that climbed up to his ears.

"What's an Upland pay envelope doin' in the Sierra depot?" Boyle wanted to know. "It was found near your locker, Lacey."

Brud crumpled the paper in his hand. "If you're accusin'—" he began hotly, but the super cut him off summarily.

"Maybe," he said, "you better tell me what really happened on Hell's End Hill that night."

The pain in Brud's head began to throb. He saw the super through a kind of haze. "I wrote out a report," he said thickly. "You can read, can't you?"

"Yeah, between the lines, too. You're coverin' something up—maybe yourself," Boyle said.

Brud licked dry lips. "A side slip." He spoke in a flat, harsh tone. "I put it down."

"It's a tough job to throw a Concord into a skid," declared Boyle, "unless you kick on the brake and slide the wheels."

"You think I did it on purpose?" Brud said incredulously. "You think I went over the rim with that rig and got laid up for the Upland outfit?"

"I ain't sayin'," Boyle grunted. "But if I had proof you been takin' money from that wildcat crowd, I'd bust you in a dozen different places. I'd blackball you from here to Mexico." He flattened his mouth, let the silence that followed draw out thin and tight, then said in a softer tone: "You've been at least an hour behind time every day since you came back to work. Yesterday you left here at nine and never reached Highpoint till three o'clock. I've had nothing but complaints from passengers all week—people that had to wait in the rain for you. One man said he could've walked to Bridger's Gap and got there ahead of you."

"It was raining in the hills," retorted Brud, sweating now as the pain grew worse in his head. "I had to take it easy."

"Rambo says he caught up with you this side of Hell's End Hill. He said you was pulled off the trail for no reason. He said—"

"Rambo can go pound salt!" Brud's voice came out with an anguished crack.

"No," said Boyle. "But he can drive your outfit from now on."

Brud met the super's icy stare. His lips moved, but he couldn't make

REPRODUCED BY ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a sound. Anger choked him—anger at his own weakness, his fears, his abject failure. Anger at Nate Rambo for double-crossing him, for hounding him as he had for months, for making a fool out of him before Sue Stockman, before Dave Boyle, before the whole Sierra crowd.

"Maybe," the super went on remorselessly, "you wouldn't know about it, but we may lose the franchise to Upland. They've undercut our fares and freight rate, and our contract runs out with the Copper King Mine next week. I got no alternative, Lacey, for what I'm goin' to do."

Brud sagged. "You mean I'm fired?" he asked. "Washed up?"

"That's up to you. Rambo'll take your run, startin' today. You can have the slug job, at twenty per, and if you handle it all right, in six months I'll talk to you again."

Brud somehow got out of Boyle's office. He didn't see the look of anxiety on Sue Stockman's face. He didn't see anything very clearly, and blundered against the guard rail on his way out to the passenger ramp. He was seeing that night on Hell's End Hill—seeing the long, unbroken grade before him, like a tunnel swooping down into the blackness—seeing the dull shine of Rambo's side lamps on the rocks beside the trail, hearing Rambo's taunting yell and the rumble of the freighter's iron-rimmed wheels. The sudden jamming on of his own hand brake to check the momentum of the big stagecoach, and then the crash as Rambo's rig swept past and slewed across the trail in front of him—the wide, grinding skid, the sensation of falling—falling—

II

They called it the "murder run" because it was slow and wearying, a grind nobody wanted. Beginners got it, and drivers who had disobeyed the company rules. And now Brud had it. After five years carrying passengers and freight on the fast time, Brud was back on the dead freight haul. It was grease on your face, grime on your hands; it was sweat-and-swear; it was stopping at every tank town between Navasota and the mines at Bridger's Gap.

Two men rode the slug run—the driver and a helper. Between them they had to jackass anything from baled hay and kerosene to knocked-down machine assemblies and iron pipe. It was a twelve-hour day and no union pay for overtime; and if you rolled in late, you took a raw-hiding from the stable foreman and sometimes drew the fire of Boyle himself.

When Brud hit the ramp, he was breathing hard, and the pain in his head was almost killing him. He couldn't see a thing that was in front of him, and he stumbled along the ramp, tripping over his own boots, feeling his way to the locker room. Sound came to him from the wide-open stable doors: the thud of horses' hoofs, the yells of stablemen; and the acrid smell of a blacksmith's forge cut through the drizzle-drozzle of rain along the ramp.

Outside the locker room, Brud checked himself and straightened up.

REPRODUCED BY HZ DPC
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He'd work out of this; he'd buck up and take this trouble on the chin. He was young—twenty-eight—too young to let a little thing like demotion knock him out. If that pain in his head would only quit . . .

A lank man with dull gray, vacant eyes looked up from a bench where he was pulling on his overalls. "Hello, Lacey, how's things with you?" The greeting was a bit too loud, a little too offhand, coming from Hap Dillon who was usually a silent man. Dillon was Nate Rambo's helper on the slug run, a plodding, drab individual who did his work in the freight shed and on the open road in a thoroughly unspectacular way, asking and therefore getting, no recognition from anyone.

Of course Hap knew what had happened to him, Brud was sure of that. For that matter the whole depot knew by now that Dave Boyle had broken one of the best drivers on the line. They all knew Lacey had gone soft, that he'd lost his nerve. Well, they could go to blazes, the whole outfit. His nerve *hadn't* gone. It was the after-effect of his crash. He'd show them how a man could take a beating and still come back. Just wait until that pain . . .

It was Nate Rambo's bantering voice that froze Brud where he stood, one hand touching his locker latch. The freight driver stepped out from behind a nearby row of lockers. "Well, Lacey, he cut you down to pint-size. Hey?" he taunted.

Brud didn't answer. Time after time Rambo had gone out of his way to make fun of him in front of the crew. Heretofore he had ignored the man, brushing off his clumsy attempts at sarcasm, his inept cracks that seldom got a laugh. Rambo had a ruddy, squarish face and eyes that were black and insect-sharp. He was big and awkward with big-boned wrists and hands and oversize feet encased in hob-nailed boots. He stood with his head thrown back, still smiling at Brud, still mocking him.

Brud moved toward him, his eyes tight, mouth pinched with anger. Then, suddenly, he turned back to his locker.

Rambo gave a hard laugh. "One thing, Lacey," he said, "the slug wagon ain't built for speed. You won't have to worry about your time no more. Only, when you're swingin' a load you'll have to watch her on the grades. Brakes don't hold too good. Remember?"

Brud's head throbbed until it was a dull ache all through him. He fumbled with the latch of his locker, trying to see it through the haze that dimmed his sight. He heard Hap Dillon say, from his bench: "The only bad spot you'll have to worry about is up near Broken Buttes. That hill's hell and no mistake."

Brud got the locker open, felt inside for his dungarees. He couldn't speak; and his knees felt weak; the locker seemed to rotate in front of him. He gripped the metal to hold it still.

"Maybe," Rambo was saying, "you better ask for your time and save gettin' in more trouble. Maybe you better quit while the quittin's good. The slug job's no good for

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you. It takes a man to rod that—"

Brud whipped around and flung himself at Rambo with an incoherent cry of fury. He moved with piston-driven swiftness but with no sense of direction because everything before him was a kind of reddish blur. He struck out blindly, missed Rambo's jaw with his reckless swing. The momentum of his charge staggered him off balance and he fell against the row of lockers.

Rambo laughed again. Very deliberately, he measured Brud, pulled back his right fist and drove it at Brud's unprotected head. Bone met bone with an impact that echoed in the locker room. The blow caught Brud squarely on the scar at his temple. He swayed, fell back against the row of lockers, gasping, arms lifted in front of his face to ward off another blow.

Boots pounded on the ramp outside. Men clustered in the opening of the door. Brud heard Sue Stockman's indignant voice: "Let me pass!" His head, his heart, his chest felt as if they were wrapped in layers of smothering wool. Sue's voice came to him through his pain. "Leave him alone, Nate! Stop bullying a man that's sick!"

The long-drawn "Ah!" of the crewmen in the doorway went up in the silence that followed. It was a sound of regret, of scorn. Scorn not for the girl who had interfered in a fight between two men, but disgust, contempt for the one who cringingly allowed a woman to intercede in his behalf. They were hard men, tough and crude, and they judged a man by the way he faced a challenge, by the way he accepted a defeat.

Brud tried to focus his eyes on the scene in front of him. He heard Nate Rambo say: "He ain't sick, Miss Sue. He's yeller—yeller all through!"

The men in the doorway were turning away. Brud heard the scrape of their boots fade down the ramp. He stared at Sue. She stood just inside the door, eyes wide and dark, filled with anxiety.

"Go 'way!" He choked the words out through gray, drawn lips. "You ain't helpin' me! Go 'way!"

The slug wagon had a capacity of five tons in its cargo space. Twenty-five feet from pole to tailboard, it had wheels with hand-wrought oaken spokes as thick as a man's arm. The rear pair, wide-rimmed, solid, stood man-high, revolved around drums as big as powder kegs. The rig was called "The Coffin" by men of the Sierra Line. The driver's seat, slung on leather straps instead of springs, was perched eight feet above the ground, and was reached by inset iron steps.

The wagon was steady enough on the level, on up-grades, too; but dangerous on descents with a load of dead freight aboard. On a descending grade, if you let the horses run, the rig would become a thing of destruction, a juggernaut.

That first day on the slug run, Brud was careful not to let the wagon get out of control. He held the six-horse string of blacks on the down grades, and rode the brake until smoke streamed from the huge brake

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shoes. Nevertheless it was tough to take. And, to make a bad thing worse, Hap Dillon remained as helper. He sat on the high seat, sullen and silent while he smoked his battered corncob pipe and stared out over the horses' heads.

Brud covered the forty-odd miles to the mines at Bridger's Gap that day in twelve hours for the round trip. They rolled into the home depot at half past eight that night. And Brud was bone-weary, ready to hit the straw. He didn't even take time to eat after he'd checked in at the freight ramp behind the sprawling stables.

But the second and third days were harder than ever to take. The pick-up chores, the unloading, began to tell on him. He lost weight and had a tight-drawn expression on his thin face; and his head pained constantly. Dillon was letting him take the brunt of the work, ignoring Brud's orders at times, contemptuous, belligerent, aloof.

Brud was aware, too, of Nate Rambo on the road to Bridger's Gap. The first day, southbound, he had seen nothing of the stagecoach, but on the second, third and fourth trips to the mines Rambo overtook the freight wagon at the foot of Hell's End Hill, just after Brud had left the relay station at Broken Buttes. It seemed to Brud that Rambo was deliberately trying to trap him on the summit so he could cut the Concord ahead of the slug job, and force the freighter to the rim of the trail.

"There's a driver for you," Dillon had said, when Rambo went roaring by, throwing mud and gravel high. Then, when Brud reached the top of the hill, Dillon would sneer at his precautions, the way he held the horses in and rode the brake. It was Dillon's silent scorn and the thought of Rambo getting him finally on the hill that became an obsession with Brud. It became such an obsession that—and Brud secretly hated himself for it—he found himself taking longer and longer to make the regular run.

And so it came as no surprise to him when, at the end of the first week, Dave Boyle sent for him again. It had been raining off and on for the whole week, and the day Brud entered the little outer office at the depot for the second time, a cloudburst had hit the town and its environs. All the way from his rooming house, Brud fought against sheets of rain and the steady, driving pressure of the northeast gale. Streets churned with mud and water, and the ramp, as Brud slogged over it, was ankle-deep, awash with mud and debris.

Standing in the waiting room, he wiped water from his face, seeing Sue Stockman smile wanly at him from her desk. He did not greet her nor return her smile. It wasn't that he thought any less of her, but his pride wouldn't let him admit that maybe he *had* been wrong in censuring her for taking his part that day in the locker room. He realized that she had only meant to protect him against unfair advantage when his strength had been at low ebb, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to admit it in that many words. He took off his rain-soaked hat and said:

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tell Boyle I'm here." That was all.

The super sat behind his desk as Brud walked in. This time Boyle let go with a broadside of words without the usual preliminary silence. "I'm beginnin' to think Rambo has you doped out right, Lacey. I think your guts've turned to fiddlestrings! What d'you think you're running—a hearse?"

"If Nate Rambo had his way I'd be ridin' inside of one," Brud retorted harshly.

Boyle leaned over his desk. "Meanin'?"

"Nothin'," said Brud.

"Lacey, you've got today. One more trip to show me. And if you don't show me, you can get your time from Sue."

Brud stared. "Is that all?"

"You're pickin' up a pump assembly down at the freight yards," Boyle told him. "They've had a washout up at the Copper King and need that pump to clear the water out of Drift Two. Here's your chance to square Sierra with the mine people before our contract runs out and we lose their business."

Brud went out quietly. Sue Stockman stopped him in the outer office. "Brud, I want to talk to you. I'm sorry for what I did—what I said that day—"

"Forget it," he said stiffly, trying to keep a bleakness out of his tone. It seemed as though Sue was always waiting there at her desk to witness the defeat on his face, the hopelessness, the fear. It rankled him. "So long." He walked out then, hearing the quick catch of her breath, knowing that he had hurt her, but not caring very much. His mind was full of his own troubles; and the pain in his head was bothering him more than ever now.

When he reached the locker room he was aware of voices. One belonged to Nate Rambo, and it came from behind a row of lockers. "Today's the deadline, Hap," the driver was saying. "If we can keep him from deliverin' that pump gear to the mine, on time, the contract's as good as canceled. And we'll be settin' pretty."

"What d'you mean *we*?" came Dillon's sullen voice. "Where do *I* fit with Upland? They never heard of me."

"I'll take care of you," Rambo assured him. "All you got to do is keep him scared of Hell's End Hill. And if he makes his time to Broken Buttes, tie him up long enough so I can overtake you on the Hump. I'll be rollin' over at twelve-fifteen."

III

At eight o'clock that morning, the storm reached its full fury. The gale increased, and was cold and biting. The temperature had dropped to the middle forties from almost summer heat. The rain slashed obliquely out of the southeast, pasting Brud's hat brim against his forehead, gluing his slicker to his rangy frame. On the high seat beside him, Hap Dillon sat huddled in dismal silence, his vacant eyes searching the storm-swept trail. They had loaded the pump assembly at the freight yards on the West End,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and were out in open country, heading southward toward Moon Creek, their first stop, where they would drop a ton of grain at a feed warehouse.

Brud made up his mind to be ready to leave Moon Creek by nine-thirty. He reached out for his whip, sent the lash curling out over the leaders' heads. The three-team string settled down to the grind, leaning into the hames, pulling the tugs taut as they jogged into the storm. Brud was aware that Hap Dillon was watching him with a sideways stare, but paid him no heed. He knew now what was in store for him, and, though he dreaded the uncertainty of its exact nature, he had felt no fear at the moment—only a dull hate for the man at his side and for Nate Rambo who had finally showed his hand.

They came to a fork in the trail, pushed down the road that branched eastward, rolling briskly now on the hard cambered surface, unhindered by mud or washouts. A mile from Moon Creek, however, they hit a stretch of trail broken up by heavy traffic of ore wagons. They came up behind a dray which had sunk in the muck and was blocking the road. Brud felt his heart sink. This would mean delay unless he acted fast. He stopped the slug wagon and climbed down.

The driver of the dray stood nearby, stolidly waiting. It took but a moment to grasp the situation. Brud went back to the slug wagon and climbed up for the rope that hung coiled below the seat.

"You'll have to dig him out," Dillon commented. "Can't pull him out of that mess."

"We'll pull him out," said Brud curtly.

"Your funeral." Dillon shrugged, making no move to help.

"Get down and give me a hand," ordered Brud.

"You do it your way," the helper retorted. "I'll watch it."

It was then that Brud spotted the black letters on the body of the mired wagon. They read, UPLAND TRANSPORTATION CO. Brud hesitated. If Boyle should hear about this—and Dillon would make sure he did—it would be one more black mark against him. To hell with it! Brud got his rope around the front wheel hubs of the Upland rig, made the other end fast to his own rear axle.

"You'll pull our springs out," Dillon warned from the seat.

Brud ignored him.

It took fifteen minutes to drag the Upland wagon out of the mud. But that was fifteen minutes too long for Brud. He didn't bother to recoil the rope but wound it around the tail irons of the slug job, climbed up to the seat and started the horses on down the trail. He reached the warehouse at Moon Creek at quarter to ten, fifteen minutes later than he'd planned on.

Backed up to the loading platform in the driving rain, he started moving the bags of grain alone. Dillon sat on the seat and refused to budge. Boiling inwardly, Brud finished the chore. He was winded and weak when he picked up the lines and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whipped the horses into a slogging walk. They reached Broken Buttes at twenty minutes to twelve.

Just let him get over the Hump and down Hell's End Hill before Rambo came roaring through with the Concord—that was all Brud worried about now. He was beginning to feel sick and cold at the thought of that grade and the chance that Rambo would overtake him there.

The relay agent brought out the fresh teams and hooked them on while Brud went into the station to warm himself at the wood stove. Dillon remained outside; he was standing in the lee of the rig when Brud came out. There was a sly look on the helper's face, an expression of triumph, almost. Both men scaled the steps to the seat and pulled for the grade, just a mile ahead now, and smothered by the ruck of the storm. It was exactly noon when the slug wagon topped the ridge and started down.

From the summit of Hell's End Hill, Brud stared downward through the mist and rain, glimpsing the timbered ridges of Beaverhead Valley through which the swollen silvered ribbon of a river made its lazy loops. A heavy dread hung over Brud as the slug wagon started down the first slow pitch, a dull ache pulsed behind the scar on his temple. The old fear was back again; the rain pelted his face, and there was the slippery mud of the hill swooping down ahead of him, with its low shoulders and the twenty-foot gullies to right and left, the jagged rocks below—

Brud pulled gently back on the lines, bunched tightly in his left hand. He reached out for the long brake handle, tried it a notch, hearing the ratchets clack as the iron pawl skipped slowly along the gear. The wagon was rolling faster now, and the string sat back to hold the heavily loaded rig. Something was wrong! The brake shoes gave off no grinding sound. Brud held his breath, drew back hard on the brake handle. Still the freighter rolled. The horses braced their hoofs in the slime, their rumps almost scraping the surface of the road.

There was a scramble at Brud's side. He looked in time to see Hap Dillon slide off the seat and drop from view. Brud knew then that Dillon had tampered with the brake back at the relay station, knew that the helper was deserting the wagon, like the rat he was, while there was still time to jump.

A vast rage suddenly, overwhelmingly, took possession of Brud. He glared into the storm, though he could see nothing but a whirl of mist and rain and the grade immediately before him. And then the sound came—the moment he had dreaded had come. Above and behind the slug wagon came the steady pound of hoofs, the rumble and creak of high wheels, the hollow slapping of a Concord's body on its springs. Brud's spine stiffened—his stomach crawled sickeningly.

Now the freighter was ponderously gathering momentum; Brud felt the immense weight, the forward-lunging speed. The horses, unable to hold the rig back—

PRODUCED BY OCR/ZOMBIE
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

let them go. He could do nothing else.

He took time to look backward up the trail. He saw the four-horse string of the stagecoach break out of the veil of mist and rain, saw the rocking body of Rambo's rig and the driver himself on the pilot seat, his arms pulled out straight. Rambo was yelling, but the wind took his voice and threw it away.

Brud gripped the ribbons, braced his boots on the iron foot rail. Fear left him at this moment, the pain in his head eased up. He had no time to think, no time for anything but to keep the slug wagon on the road, hold the horses in some semblance of a line. The worst of the hill lay ahead and below him, with that hairpin curve at the bottom, the jagged rocks, the yawning gullies to right and left. The low guard rails to right and left, rimming the trail, appeared to him like gray streaks rushing out of the rain at him.

So Rambo was going to pile him up, was he? He was going to frighten him into crashing the slug job—going to hog the road? Well, let him try!

IV

Brud settled his weight on the seat, gripped the wet lines in both hands and prayed that the jolting of the rig would not hurl him to the trail. Rambo was sweeping closer back there, the hoofs of his horses cutting, smashing the slippery road.

All right, it was suicide to let the freighter roll this way. But what did Brud have to lose? His job would be gone if he wrecked the rig. And he was a joke to the Sierra crew—a joke to Rambo who was driving the outfit he, Brud, had earned the right to wheel and had been cheated out of by Rambo's treachery.

Crouched on the seat, Brud stared into the whirl of the storm. The slug wagon, still heavily loaded, bounced off the crown of the road, its tailboard danced sideways and its shifting cargo jounced with a dull crash. And it was the shift of the cargo that added to the peril of side sway. Brud half stood to fight the wagon back to the center of the trail. For a moment the outfit scraped the guard rail on the right. There was a glimpse of ragged black shadow beyond the rail. The rig hit a buried rock and heaved over dizzily, almost hurling Brud out of his perch.

It was the break Rambo had been waiting for, the chance to wedge in. For just that instant the road was open. Then Brud blinked the sweat and rain from his eyes, hauled hard on the left lines, inching the leaders back to the crown of the trail. Metal screamed against stone and wood and he knew he was clear but that his rear wheels had smashed the fence.

The rain whipped into his eyes, blinding him. The slug wagon was straight again, but he didn't breathe. His arms went through a series of motions and his feet seemed to take root in the boot rail. The whipcord muscles in his neck stood out like ropes—the air went out of his lungs in a long hard gust.

Rambo had fallen back, but was still close up. Brud could hear the

PRODUCED BY UNT CRC
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

racket of the stagecoach even over the rumble and clatter of the freighter. They must be near the foot of the hill . . .

A curve rushed out of the storm ahead. Rock walls loomed to right and left. The slug job made a sound like a locomotive thundering into a canyon. The wheels bit into the curve. Brud had a quick impression of the stage making another desperate try to pass him. Rambo could never make it now!

Then Brud was around the bend, and the rock walls cut him off from a view of the stage. The freighter was climbing the outside shoulder perilously. The rock walls were gone and there was the sheer drop of the gully again. He gripped the lines and fought the string with all his strength, fought to bring the horses into the middle of the trail again. The slug wagon tilted once, riding on its outside wheels, then slewed straight.

Brud was at the bottom of Hell's End Hill a second later, and the rig's brake shoes began to bind at last. The last hundred yards seemed like a hundred miles, but the slug wagon groaned to a halt at last. The brake shoes were streaming smoke, and Brud smelled hot grease as he climbed shakily down from the seat.

He walked back, holding onto the big rear wheel to keep from falling, for this was the aftermath of his battle with Rambo, with himself, and with Hell's End Hill. He found globs of axle grease on the brake shoes and knew then that Dillon had deliberately smeared graphite on the shoes back at the relay stop. The friction of the long dive down the grade had burned the lubrication off.

Brud stood motionless for a long moment, listening, wondering what had happened to Rambo and the Concord coach. Presently he started back up the grade. A hundred yards from the foot of the hill, he glimpsed the passenger rig hanging grotesquely over the guard rail, its front wheels hooked over the rim, its big paneled body tilted crazily as if it had tried to plunge into the gully, twenty feet below, but had been stopped in the last split second. The horses were strung out across the trail, braced in the traces, patiently waiting. Swinging up to the wreck, with his jaw set, Brud knew it was the pull of those horses that had kept the coach from plunging off the rim.

He glanced about for Rambo, but the driver was nowhere in sight. Neither was there any trace of Hap Dillon. A stillness hung over the scene—a silence broken only by the howl of the wind on the heights, and by the steady drive of the rain on the coach and on the trail.

The Concord had ripped up several yards of the guard fence before it had broken through. The rear right wheel had collapsed on a broken spring and was jammed into the crumbling earth. Nothing but that shattered wheel was holding the stagecoach where it was except the forward pressure of the horses.

Brud called to Rambo twice but got no answer. Hurriedly he found two flat rocks and chocked them behind the front wheels. After steadying the horses, he ran down the

PRODUCED BY UNZORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grade to the slug wagon, grabbed the rope off the tail irons, then returned to the wreck. He took one end of the rope, squatted and crawled beneath the canted body of the stage and tied it to the front axle, afterward making the other end fast to a post of the guard rail on the yonder side of the road. Now, if the horses and the post would only hold!

He jumped the fence, aware of the void below him and the jag-tooth rocks down there. He called again to Rambo as he stretched himself to reach the lower edge of the boot below the stage's high seat. His fingers gripped the wet metal, and rain ran down his sleeves. He gritted his teeth when he swung his weight on his arms. There was no assurance that the whole coach would not go plunging to the rocks below, dragging the horses after it.

He pulled himself up, panting heavily. He found Nate Rambo huddled in the boot, unconscious, bleeding from a gash above his eye. Brud's fingers clawed into the jacket of Rambo's dungarees. The stage driver groaned, opened his eyes, mumbling incoherently, trying to move his arms and legs but failing.

A tremor ran through the paneled body of the coach, and its tilt became more pronounced. Working as swiftly as he could, Brud pulled Rambo to the edge of the boot, clinging to the coach and to the driver to keep from losing his balance. His feet were braced precariously on the slippery side of the body. The rig shivered again, shifted farther over the crumbling rim. Brud set himself for a leap backward. He didn't know what would happen to Rambo—and he wondered why it worried him, except that if Rambo died, he, Brud, would be blamed. Along with all the rest of it.

He got an arm around the inert form of the driver, swung backward, heaving toward the road. Out and down they plunged together. Brud landed on his back with Rambo on top of him. The jar cracked Brud's teeth together. He rolled Rambo off his chest and sat up. He was exhausted, sore in every muscle, in every bone of his trail-hammered frame. But his head did not pain him any more. He sat still, breathing from the bottom of his lungs, staring into the storm, drenched to the skin, plastered with mud from head to foot. But—and he marveled at the fact—the weight of a million years had lifted from his heart.

It was nine o'clock that night when Brud rolled into the stone-paved yard at the depot in Navasota. The empty slug wagon boomed up the ramp, its big side lamps gleaming dully through the rain. It clanked to a stop before the wide-open stable doors.

Dave Boyle, at his desk, looked up when Brud walked in and came to a halt in front of him. The super's jaw was square and tough, his mouth a wire-thin line, and his eyes held

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no warmth at all. His gaze went over Brud's bedraggled form appraisingly, stayed contemplatively on the driver's gaunt face.

Brud's chin was up and his chest was out, and he stood erect with his shoulders squared. His blue eyes held no trepidation now. He had fought his fight and he had won. He had his confidence back, his self-respect. Nothing else seemed to matter now.

Boyle drew his lips back against his teeth. "Sit down!" he said.

"I'll take it standin' up," Brud answered calmly.

"They bought Rambo down here three hours ago," the super said. "He can't move his arms or legs, but the doc says it'll wear off in time. Funny how a man'll open up and talk if he thinks he's goin' to die."

"You mean—"

"He spilled the whole yarn," Boyle grunted. "How he's been takin' money from the Upland outfit right along. We got Dillon, too, and he spoke his piece when we put the screws on him."

Brud gulped.

Boyle still stared at him, but now the line of his mouth relaxed. "I know pretty much what happened on Hell's End Hill today," he said. "And what happened there that day when you dropped off the rim." He got cumbersomely to his feet and advanced on Brud.

Brud met his impenetrable gaze unwaveringly. "Well?"

"Can I trust you to handle your old run again?" Boyle asked. "Or will I have to call you on the carpet every day?"

"Try me. I handled it before."

"You can thank Sue Stockman I didn't kick you out a week ago," Boyle told him. "She fought for you. Said she'd quit if I tied the can to you. And, hell, she's the best damn timekeeper we ever had!"

Brud felt a warm tide flow over him. "Now you're talkin' horse sense, boss!" he breathed.

"How's your head?"

"Just like I'd had six drinks of rye," Brud grinned. "Floatin' in thin air."

"If it bothers you, take a few days off."

"It didn't stop me much today," said Brud.

"I'll say it didn't," Dave Boyle agreed. "You used it all the way!"

"When do I begin?"

"Soon's we get the rig patched up," the super said. He reached out one grimy paw and gripped Brud's hand. "And now you better patch it up with Sue."

"Boss," Brud went on to say, "it's only fair to warn you. Maybe you're goin' to lose your time clerk anyways."

Sue was waiting in the outer office, smiling, hesitant, a question in her hazel eyes. "Why, Brud," she said, "you look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

"Maybe" he laughed, "I did see one. But I'm lookin' at an angel now!"

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

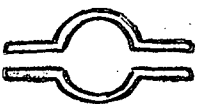
BRANDS

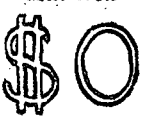
Cowman's Trademark

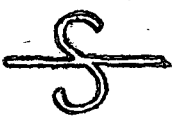
by

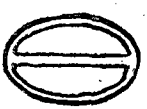
NAT W. McKELVEY

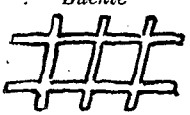
45 Connected

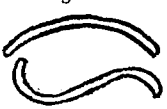

Mill Iron


No Money


Split S
Bar S


Buckle


Pig Pen


Half Circle
Lazy S

To discover that fire branding of cattle and other livestock did not originate in our own storied West, may come as a rude shock to many a saddle-bowed puncher.

Almost four thousand years ago, Egyptian cowboys were rounding up camels and oxen, dragging them to the branding fires. Ancient Romans, Greeks and Chinese also slung the red-hot "burnin' iron." And in the Middle Ages, the British burned the Broad Arrowhead on their military livestock. Hundreds of years earlier, according to the Bible, the great herdsman, Jacob, had fire-branded his stock.

In Eygpt, the tombs of the Pharaohs are carved with scenes that clearly show, not only ancient brands, but Egyptian cowhands wielding the iron. Often the brands are the name or sign of a god, the outline of a temple, or simply a herd number. For example, one scene shows an ox with a "43" burned on its hip. Complicated ideographs, known to most of us as mere laundry marks, served as brand symbols in China.

Curiously, some authorities suspect that fire branding of cattle is the outgrowth of branding humans.

Hay Hook

Open A Bar

Snake In Moon

Buck Horn

Rocking Chair

R Up And Down

Rafter Dot

PRODUCED BY LHZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At the time of Caesar, slaves who had run away once or oftener, and thieves were branded with an "F," which stood for "fugitivus," the Latin word for "fugitive." Thus branded, they couldn't very easily hide their identity and so were a cinch to recapture.

England, until the middle of the seventeenth century, burned the "F" on street fighters. In this case it stood for "fraymaker," the English term for anyone who enjoyed picking fights. The English also labeled tramps with a "V," standing for "vagrant." In our own America, thieves were branded on the left thumb, in the palm of the hand, or on the cheek.

Branding of humans carried over into the period of winning the West and beyond, and even during the Ethiopian war, the minions of Haile Selassie branded their own deserters, whenever they could catch them.

As for the branding of cattle in territory now held by Uncle Sam, that did not begin until some time after 1518 when Cortez arrived in the New World with the first cows, cowboys, and branding irons. From Spain, the great conquistador brought his own iron. Symbolic of the Holy Trinity, Cortez's cattle carried three crosses.

But the real founder of the American cattle industry was a Spanish gentleman with the picturesque name of Cabeza de Vaca—Mr. Cowhead. Quite logically, he used his name as his brand. His descendants are still stamping the "cowhead" brand on their herds of Western cattle.

Once introduced into the West, branding took hold rapidly. As a matter of practical necessity, cattlemen had to mark their animals in such a way that they could distinguish them from those belonging to other outfits. One of the pioneers was old John Chisum, who burned the famous "Fence Rail," a straight horizontal line running from a steer's shoulder to tail.

Logically, many early American brands are direct adaptations from the Spanish brands of the conquistadors. Stephen F. Austin, father of the Texas cattle industry and the first Anglo-Saxon to run a brand in the Lone Star State, used a rather fancy "F" known as "the old Spanish brand." To American cowhands, these Spanish and Mexican brands are more familiarly called "the map of Mexico" or "Skillet of snakes."

Branding irons themselves are of two kinds, running and stamping. Historically, the running iron has had its widest use in the Old West, particularly during the great days of the open range. The running iron is nothing but a short iron bar with one end rounded into a half circle. It is used much as a tattoo artist uses an electric pencil. Brands to be "run on" can be extremely intricate if the iron is swung by a practiced hand. Otherwise, the stamping iron is recommended.

Because of the indiscriminate use of the running iron by rustlers, widely known as "rewrite men," it has been largely outlawed. In Texas, to possess one is a crime. So the stamping iron has come into its own. The stamping iron carries the en-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tire brand on its head, much like a signet ring. Through the years, experience has shown that brands, to be stamped, should be essentially simple and devoid of straight lines and sharp angles.

As the art of branding developed in the American West, the owners of specific brands began to devise means to secure those brands to themselves exclusively. Publication of cattle brands in Western stock papers came into popular use about 1886, during the peak period for raising cattle on the open range.

Though the advertisements had no legal status, they did tend to warn rustlers against poaching. An ad published by a cattleman in Prescott, Arizona, showed his circle-cross brand, listed other brands owned by him, and described the earmarks carried by his stock. It concluded with this paragraph:

"A liberal reward will be paid for the return of any strays to my ranch. I also wish it understood that no monkeying with my stock will be tolerated, and any person who seeks, off of my herd, to illegitimately increase his own, will have the hot soup of justice everlastingly pumped into him."

Nowadays brands are legally protected by registration. Once registered, a brand becomes the range trademark of an owner and cannot be duplicated by another without suffering penalties, including fines and imprisonment. In the old days, of course, rustlers and rewrite men were unceremoniously "telegraphed home" at the end of a stout lariat.

When a new brand is designed, it must be presented, as in Arizona, to the Livestock Sanitary Board or similar agency. The notice of intention to register is published and the public given a specified time in which to file protest against the new brand. If no protest is voiced, if the board finds the brand technically sound—not easily altered—and finds that it isn't too similar to some other brand, it is admitted to the register.

In Texas, where counties are as large as many eastern States, brands are registered by the county. During the Texas trail days, the Lone Star State required, in addition to the regular brand, a road brand for all herds in transit. Northbound cattle had to wear "a large and plain mark . . . on the left side of the back behind the shoulder." With their road brands and county brands, some Texas cow critters who changed hands frequently were burned until they looked like a brand book.

With the passing of the open range, the concentration of beef raising in the hands of large interests, and the general technological advances of the past twenty years, fire branding faced an assault by science. From chemical laboratories came a technique known as "toothbrush branding."

Toothbrush branding is done with hot chemicals which, paradoxically, are applied "cold." These cold brands are done with a paint made from croton oil and sodium hydroxide. They are applied with a brush or special stamping iron. The iron is dipped in the solution, touched to the cow's hide where the chemical ac-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion destroys hair and flesh sufficiently to leave a brand scar.

Manufacturers of branding chemicals, while admitting that they are not fool-proof, claim that, properly used, they constitute an easier, faster and more humane method than does the hot iron. In practice, the fluid must be kept at a temperature of eighty degrees to prevent it from becoming too thick. Thus, in cold climates, a fire would have to be made to warm the stuff and thermometers kept handy to check temperatures. Old-timers generally have sneered at the new-fangled method and stick to their traditional hot irons.

As a means of positive identification, cattle branding has proven so successful that brands have been tried as a means of keeping track of bees and grasshoppers. A bee raiser in California "brands" his special queen bees with a pigment and government scientists, studying the depredations of swarms of hoppers, have adopted the same technique to record their migrations.

Cow-country kids have been known to capture pack rats and firebrand them. Hunters have shot deer burned with a cattle brand by some waggish puncher who threw a long, fast loop. At Pitchfork, Wyoming, the Belden Ranch owns a branded airplane as does the Bell Ranch in New Mexico. Years ago, Winfield Scott used to sign his bank checks with his brand.

Since the beginning of fire branding, four thousand years ago, whatever a cattleman has considered significant, either personally or historically, has found its way onto the hides of animals. In Arizona, a prominent rancher dedicated a herd of steers to his corporal son, by branding them IKE Connected, in honor of General Eisenhower. And following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Texas cowmen registered some variation of PH no less than seventy-four times.

Branding came into being in ancient Eygpt, China, Rome and Greece because of the need for distinguishing the livestock of one owner from that of another. For the same reason, it was introduced into the New World where it continues as the cowman's personal trademark. It is so personal, in fact, that it extends from cattle and horses to wagons, automobiles, airplanes, jewelry, stationery, blankets, spurs, saddles and even to clothing.

Fire branding is done in almost every country of the world but nowhere more promiscuously and with greater symbolism than in the American West.

THE END

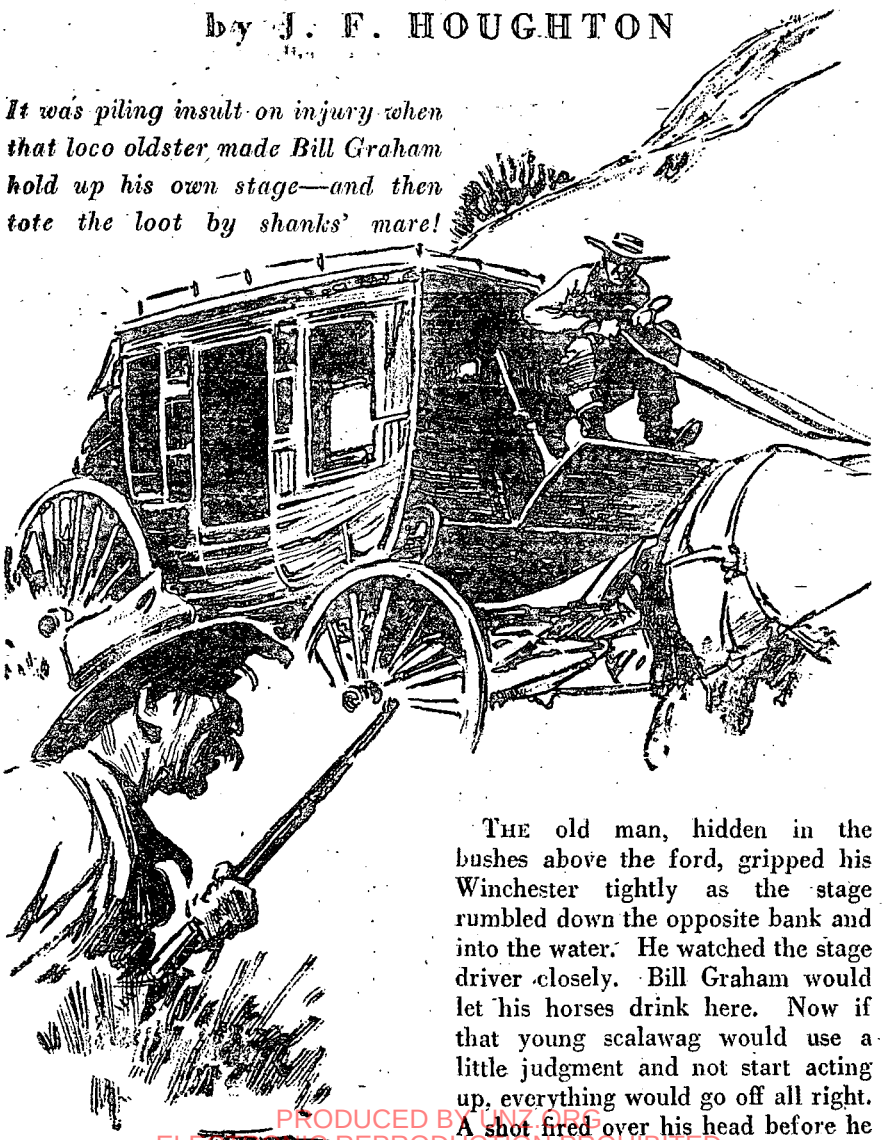
Everyone should be able to read this brand which tells you that its wearer has been honorably discharged from the U. S. armed forces of World War II.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BACK-TRAIL BOOMERANG

by J. F. HOUGHTON

It was piling insult on injury when that loco oldster made Bill Graham hold up his own stage—and then tote the loot by shanks' mare!



THE old man, hidden in the bushes above the ford, gripped his Winchester tightly as the stage rumbled down the opposite bank and into the water. He watched the stage driver closely. Bill Graham would let his horses drink here. Now if that young scalawag would use a little judgment and not start acting up, everything would go off all right. A shot fired over his head before he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew what was going on should keep him from getting too rannicky.

The stage rolled down into the creek, brakes squealing. Water spattered the wheels, rose slowly to the hubs. The driver drew back on the reins.

"Whoa, boys," he called.

The horses stopped. Their heads drooped. Muzzles were thrust into the running water, and the animals drank greedily. The driver leaned forward in his seat, elbows resting on his knees, the reins held loosely in his hands.

The old man stepped out of his hiding place. The Winchester leaped to his shoulder when he was clear of the bushes.

"Hands up," he ordered. His voice broke with his tenseness. "Don't touch that gun of yourn, young feller." He fired one shot high over the stage to emphasize the order.

Startled, Bill Graham straightened up. The reins fell from his hands. The rifle, lower now, was pointed straight at his body. A wisp of smoke still clung to the muzzle. Graham raised his hands.

"Throw that shotgun of yourn into the creek and don't try any shenanigans with it," came the next order from the old man. "You can do that with one hand."

Graham lowered one hand and picked up the sawed-off shotgun resting against the seat beside him. For a moment he was tempted to swing the weapon and blast away at the man on the creek bank. But the steadily pointed rifle warned him to go slow.

"What are you trying to do, Jed?" he asked with the shotgun poised. "If I throw this into the creek, it will ruin it."

Graham had recognized the oldster as Jed Huchins, an eccentric old man who lived in a cabin in the hills far from any other habitation. Huchins, at one time, ran a general store in Belden until his son, Joe, got into a wrangle with the law and was sent to the penitentiary. This broke up the old man both financially and mentally, and though assistance was offered by Sheriff Galt Bowen and other townsmen, Huchins preferred moving out into the hills where he proceeded to make a precarious living hunting and trapping wolves and other varmints.

"There's plenty more guns you can buy," Huchins snapped. "Pitch it out, boy. We ain't got all day here."

Graham shrugged. There was no use arguing with the old coot. He might shoot to kill. The shotgun splashed into the creek.

"Now you get down and come out here."

Graham climbed down from the stage, the chilly water of the creek running over the tops of his boots. He waded ashore. The stage team

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked after him as though wondering what was going on.

Graham decided that Huchins had gone clear out of his mind. He could see no other reason why the oldster should hold up the stage. There were no passengers aboard, and only two sacks of mail. True, one of the sacks held a registered package containing several thousand dollars in bills addressed to the Belden bank. But Huchins, living his lonely life in the hills, would not know about that. Graham halted with hands raised, a dozen yards from the old man.

"Turn around," Huchins ordered. He stepped forward when Graham turned, and lifted the .45 Colt from the stage driver's belt. "Now you stay put till I get that team out of the creek."

Backing into the water with his rifle held steady on Graham, Huchins reached the stage and climbed up into the seat. Graham dropped to the ground and poured the water out of his boots. Huchins drove the team up the bank and into the mouth of a gully not far from the road. Then he jumped down.

"Get on your boots and unhook your horses and tie them up so they won't stray," he ordered them. "And get out them mail sacks you're carrying."

"Better go slow, Jed," Graham warned. "Robbing the United States mails won't get you anywhere. The—"

"I ain't robbing no mails," Huchins broke in testily. "I know what I'm doing, boy. Get them mail sacks out."

Graham shrugged his shoulders. The old coot meant business. Huchins' body was tense, and a wild light gleamed in his blue eyes. Graham pulled on his boots, unhooked the team and tied them to the wheels of the stage. Then he broke out the mail sacks.

"Now put them mail sacks on your shoulder and head up that gully," came the next order from Huchins. "And watch your step. We got a long walk ahead of us, and I ain't trusting you one bit. Won't do you any good to talk," as Graham started to protest. "Get moving."

Graham hoisted the mail sacks onto his shoulder and started up the gully. He'd have to obey the old fellow and wait for a chance to get the best of him.

Two hours' hard going over hills and through brush brought them to the crest of a spiny ridge where Huchins called a halt.

"You better rest yourself, boy," the old man said. "I don't aim to kill you, and I reckon them sacks get kind of heavy."

Graham threw the mail sacks to the ground and dropped down on top of them. He wondered where the old coot was taking him, and what would happen when they got there. They seemed to be following the general direction of the stage road toward Belden.

"Where are we headed, Jed?" he asked quietly. He wondered if Joe, Jed's boy, was mixed up in this. Joe had served his time and been discharged about a week ago. He'd

PRODUCED BY LINT ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

talk easy to the old coot; might learn something.

But Huchins was in no mood for talk. "You'll know where we're going when we get there," he replied shortly. "Now keep your mouth shut. I'm telling you nothing."

Graham shrugged his shoulders and relaxed. Huchins had lived alone for so long it probably hurt him to talk.

After a ten-minute rest, Huchins ordered Graham on. Over hills and through swales in the general direction of the town. From the top of one ridge Graham could see the dusty ribbon of road where it twisted and turned up the long hill from Cache Creek. Near the top of the hill the figure of a rider was silhouetted against the sky, facing downward toward the creek. Someone waiting for the stage to send a message into town, likely, Graham thought. He'd have a long wait.

After two more hours of hard walking they stood on the crest of a hogback overlooking the road less than a mile from Belden. Huchins called a halt.

"Far as I'm going, Bill," the old man stated. He seemed tired and weary now. The tenseness was gone from his body. "You can go on to town from here by yourself. Reckon nobody'll bother you." Dropping the rifle into the crook of his arm, he slouched loosely back in the direction from which they came.

Graham stared after the old man, too dumfounded to speak. Then he began to get mad. Danged crazy old coot! Making him walk twelve miles lugging two heavy mail sacks, then turning him loose in sight of town! For no reason at all.

He swore vividly. He'd have to ride out and get the stage after he delivered the mail. Be near midnight before he could get back. And he had to be up again at five. Danged old crazy coot ought to be shot.

Sheriff Galt Bowen listened quietly to Bill Graham's story as the stage driver sat massaging his aching feet.

"That feller's getting so crazy he don't know what he's doing, Galt," Graham finished. "He ought to be put in jail for his own good. He'll be killing someone some day."

"Living alone like he's been and thinking too much about Joe kind o' got his brain twisted maybe," Bowen replied. "You've had a tough time, Bill. Go home and rest. I'll send my deputy out for your stage, and I'll go out myself and bring Jed into town. Maybe we can find Joe and get him to look after the old man. We wouldn't want to put a harmless old feller like Jed in jail now, would we?"

REPRODUCED BY UNI-OFG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Reckon not if we could get around it," Graham replied grudgingly. He was still sore about that walk. "We was all friends of Jed at one time, Galt. But something should be done about the old coot. He might do some damage next time he goes on a rampage."

Darkness covered the hills by the time Sheriff Galt Bowen reached the narrow valley where Jed Huchins holed up. The sheriff tied his horse to a tree some distance from the cabin and went forward on foot. He wanted to see what Huchins was doing; slip up on him before he could get his hands on a gun. Huchins' twisted mind might force him to shoot a rider coming noisily out of the darkness.

The cabin door was closed, but a light shone through an open window. Slipping quietly up to the window, Bowen peered inside. Jed was clearing dishes off the table. Joe Huchins was seated on a bunk nearby; lean, somber-faced, with a defeated look in his gray eyes. The pen had left its mark on him.

"I'm old enough to look out for myself, dad." Joe was talking, a harsh note in his voice making his words bitter. "I'd have money now and been in the clear if you hadn't butted in."

"But I did butt in, Joe," the old man answered spiritedly. He shook a fork at his son, his blue eyes blazing. "I butted in and I'll do it again. I made Bill Graham leave his stage on Washita Creek so you couldn't hold him up, boy, and I made him carry them mail sacks to Belden so you couldn't get a hold of them if you got tired of waiting and come to meet the stage. Yeah, I might have just warned him. But he wouldn't have believed me unless I'd told him it was you waiting to hold him up. And I wouldn't do that."

"You could have kept clear out of it," growled Joe.

"And let you go back to the pen?" Huchins asked. "Yeah, you might have plenty of money if you'd got hold of them mail sacks, and you might have got away. But you wouldn't be in the clear by a long shot, boy. That was United States property you'd been robbing, and Uncle Sam don't like for people to be monkeying with anything he owns."

"What's the difference?" Joe asked wearily. "Federal pen or state pen, I'm headed back anyway. I didn't get that stage but I'll get another."

"Forget that stuff, boy," the old man said earnestly. "Get yourself an honest job and forget what you been through."

"Get an honest job," Joe cried. "Who'd give me a job now? Me, a jail bird with a crazy galoot for a father. They'll be getting you next for stopping that stage."

"Crazy!" Jed's blue eyes blazed. Then he dropped into a chair. His whole body slumped. "Yeah, reckon I am crazy, Joe, but I don't want you to be driving me crazier. And you needn't be bothering about what they'll do to me. Sheriff Bowen won't put no crazy man in jail."

Sheriff Galt Bowen slipped quietly

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

away from the window. He had heard enough. Thoughtfully he returned to his horse. He mounted, heading the animal toward the cabin. His hand dropped to his belt gun; then he shook his head. He wouldn't be needing the weapon.

"Hello, the house," he called loudly. "Are you home, Jed?"

The cabin door opened. Jed Huchins stood in the doorway, his rifle in his hands.

"Who is it?" the old man called.

"It's Galt Bowen, Jed," the lawman replied. "Put up your rifle. You won't be needing it."

Bowen dismounted, dropped the bridle reins and advanced toward the cabin. Jed stepped aside as the lawman entered. Joe stood beside the bunk, one hand resting close to a holstered .45 hanging on the wall.

"Hello, Joe," Bowen greeted. He nodded toward the younger man and dropped into a chair. "Heard you'd got home, and I wanted to see you. We're running short of help over at my place; can't seem to pick up anyone anywhere. Thought you might be needing a job now that you're footloose again."

Joe stared at the lawman through narrowed eyes, his mouth clamped shut. Bowen turned to Jed.

"Bill Graham told me about that walk you and him took today, Jed," he went on. "He figured that I ought to bring you in and put you in my jail house. Then we learned that some of the wild bunch . . . didn't find out just who . . . was waiting at the top of Cache Creek hill to hold up the stage. We figured then that you'd done Uncle Sam a favor, though it was kind of tough on Bill. Walking don't agree with him, especially when he's got wet boots on." He grinned, then glanced up at the two men. They were regarding him with puzzled expressions. "Maybe you'd like to come over to the ranch and stay with Joe, Jed," he went on. "We got a lot of varmints over that way that need cleaning out."

Jed Huchins and his son weren't looking at the sheriff now. They were looking at each other, and the expressions on their faces gave him an answer they didn't need to put in words.

THE END

THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Even though we've finally hogtied the Nazis an' Japs, our boys are still goin' to need plenty backin' so it's up to us to buy

MORE WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RANCHMAN'S THANKSGIVING

by S. OMAR BARKER

THEY asked me "What's a barbecue?" I told 'em it's a feast
That fits the Western rangeland like a clambake fits the East.
When ranchmen want to entertain, they don't dress up in tails—
They put some men to choppin' wood, an' send out o'er the trails
The word they're gonna cook some beef on such an' such a day,
An' hope that folks will join them in a rangeland holiday.

When good prime beef is roasted in a pit dug in the earth,
It may be meant to celebrate a weddin' or a birth,
A new ranch home completed or a mortgage paid in full,
Or just the recent purchase of a pure-bred Hereford bull.
In fact an ol' ranch barbecue don't need no more excuse
Than just some rancher's feelin' that he'd like to cut 'er loose
An' let his friends an' neighbors know he's got the beef an' wood
To celebrate a little when the grass is growin' good.
There ain't no class distinctions at a Western barbeque:
Bank presidents an' nesters git the same wohaw * to chew.
The coffee an' the pickles, like the welcome an' the shade,
Are just as free to millionaires as them that plies a trade.
There ain't no rules of etiquette on how to set or squat,
Except that at a barbecue all feuds must be forgot.

It's said that them ol' Texans, who are rawhide-jawed an' tough,
Will barbecue most anything that stands still long enough.
But ranchmen down in Texas, same as elsewhere in the West,
They butcher out to barbecue their fattest an' their best.
It's beef instid of turkey, but no matter what the name
Nor when it's held, a barbecue's "thanksgivin'" just the same.
Of course these days of war time our soldiers needin' meat,
Them ten-steer barbecues ain't held, but when this war's complete,
There'll sure be meat throwed on the fire to celebrate again,
With wohaw an' thanksgivin' the return of fightin' men!

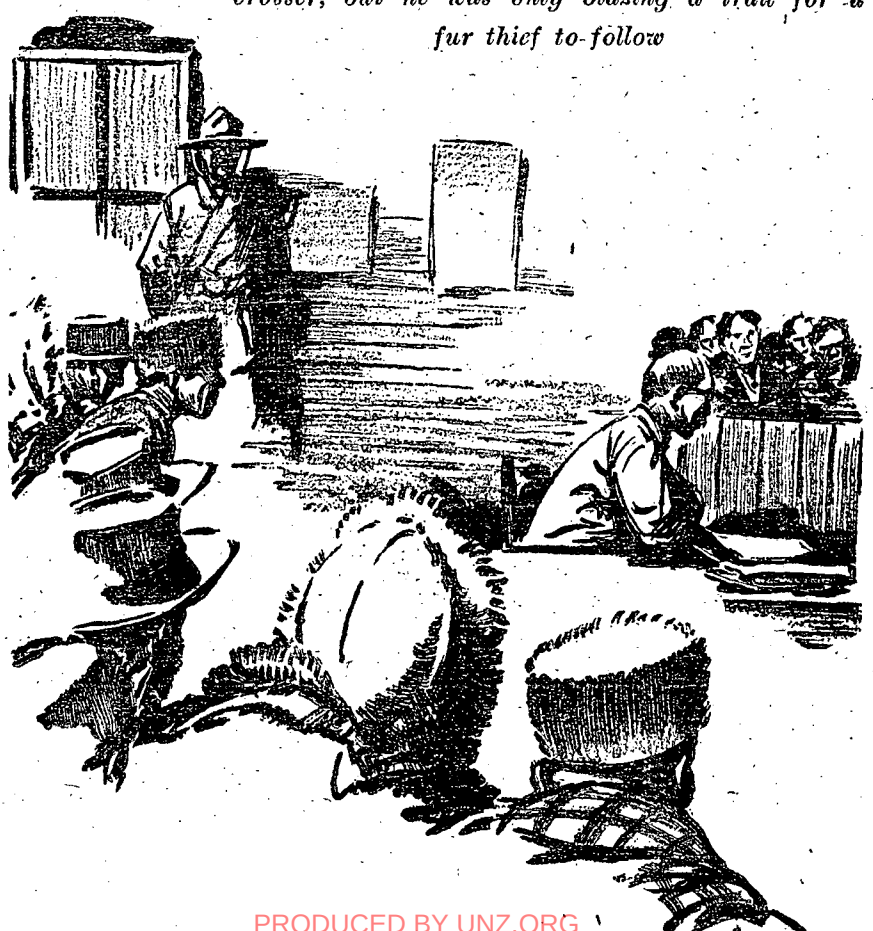
* *wohaw—beef.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TRAP SCARRED

by SETH RANGER

When Jim McCord took over his pard's trap line, the Cold Deck sourdoughs called him a double-crosser, but he was only blazing a trail for a fur thief to follow



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I

THE district courtroom in Cold Deck was crowded. The benches were filled and men and a few women lined the walls. Only the jury box and the chairs reserved for witnesses, lawyers and officials were empty. The air was heavy with the odor of fur, wood smoke from the heater, and tobacco smoke of men getting in a couple of extra puffs before the bailiff came in and rapped for order.

Outside, in the thirty below temperature, men stood in line, waiting for a chance to enter and listen in on the trial whenever anyone decided to leave the courtroom.

Alaska had seen drama in various forms since the first Asiatic had crossed salt water to its shores, but nothing like this. Jim McCord, the district attorney, was trying to send his best friend, Max Adams, to prison.

The miners wintering at Cold Deck had taken sides. One faction insisted that Max Adams was guilty; that he had taken advantage of Jim's friendship and official position, and had tried to put something over; and but for the game warden's vigilance, he would have gotten away with it. This faction argued that even now Jim wouldn't really prosecute his friend, as his oath of office required. Jim, the faction insisted, would go

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the motions of trying to convict Max, but would leave so many loose ends that the jury would feel that there was "a reasonable doubt" of guilt and acquit the defendant.

The opposing faction argued that Jim was ambitious to make a record for himself, and that he wasn't above sacrificing a friend to climb a notch up the ladder. Moreover, Max Adams' fiancée had come to Alaska to teach school, and Jim had met her. He had taken her to dances when Max was out running the trap line and plenty of people claimed they were in love. One good way of settling the problem, sourdoughs argued, was to send Max to prison. A girl like Martha Ramstad couldn't be blamed for breaking an engagement with a jailbird. And why shouldn't she marry a handsome young devil with Jim McCord's future?

Sooner or later the opposing factions started throwing fists, and the marshal, Sam Nokes, had to break up fights. Because the trapping season was on, Max had insisted on an immediate trial. Someone, only the banker knew who, had put up bail and Max was taking care of his trap line. On his last trip out he had left his traps in convenient trees. If he were found innocent, he intended resetting them. If guilty? Well, the country would be open to the man who first got into the territory. In the meantime, animals wouldn't be left to die in unattended traps.

During the trial Jim and Max continued to occupy the same cabin. Neither would give way to the other. Each argued: "It's a comfortable cabin, one of the best in Cold Deck, so why should I get out? It's my home, isn't it?" The camp wouldn't have been surprised if a rough-and-tumble fight broke out any time. Jim and Max were rugged young men, inclined to peace, but ready to start slugging if someone pushed them around.

Now, in the jammed courtroom, the miners discussed the case and impatiently awaited the jury's return. The jury came out of the café operated by Flapjack Meehan and Tubby Willows and crossed the frozen, rutted street to the courthouse. Full of moose steak, flapjacks and black coffee—at government expense—they took their time.

They shed their parkas in the jury room and presently emerged and occupied the box. The judge came in, everyone stood up, and the usual formalities followed. Jim McCord called Moose Mullen as a witness.

"A barge of a man was sworn in, took the stand and identified himself as game warden.

"Tell in your own words what happened, Moose," Jim said.

"Squaw Valley is closed to trapping," explained Mullen. "The finest fur comes from there. That's why it was over-trapped—why we had to close it. It's hard country to get into; hard to partrol. We're short of help and poachers know it. The law says that trappers must report to the nearest game warden and have their beaver pelts inspected and seals put on 'em.

"Squaw Valley and Trapper Valley are divided by the Smoky Moun-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tains. They're called that because snow blows all winter long and it looks like smoke," Moose Mullen continued. Trappers and miners alike nodded their heads. "It's all bad country. Only a man with nerve would think of trapping in either valley. Or a man who needed money mighty bad." He glanced at Max Adams. "You can freeze to death, get killed by a snowslide, and now and again the wolves gang up on you. I know of only three or four men nervy or desperate enough to gamble on Trapper Valley—Max Adams, Big Oliver Shultz and Phil Enos. All three need money and—"

"I object," Max Adams' lawyer cut in. "The need of money—"

"I'm trying to show that only those three could possibly be the poachers," Mullen boomed.

"Objection overruled," the judge said. "Proceed."

"As I said, the game department is short of help and I can't be every place at once," Mullen went on. "I asked Jim McCord to affix seals on pelts that come in when I'm out of camp. Well, I get a tip that Jim is shutting his eyes when Max Adams' pelts come through. I'm told that Max has snuck through Windy Pass and into Squaw Valley and trapped twenty or thirty beaver—protected beaver. It don't sound reasonable at first."

"Why not?" asked McCord.

"Nobody in his right mind would cross Windy Pass this time of the year," Moose answered. "It's the only way you can get from Trapper Valley to Squaw Valley, unless you want to start at The Forks—that's where Squaw River and Trapper River join, about twenty miles from Cold Deck. Anybody starting up Squaw River from The Forks would be noticed."

"Go on," said Jim.

"You're not going to like this part, Jim," Moose told him.

"Tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may," Jim directed. "We're after the truth."

"Well," continued Mullen, "I think, if Jim McCord is letting his pardner sneak contraband fur by, it's time I found it out, so I sneak up Trapper Valley, then go through Windy Pass to Squaw Valley, like a damned fool, and sure enough I find moccasin tracks. I find traps set—wolf traps, beaver traps—but I don't find hide nor hair of Max. I come back and pretend to leave Cold Deck again. I wait three, four days and Max shows up. He looks surprised and turns a little red—"

"I turned red because I was suspected," Max protested savagely. He immediately apologized. "Sorry, your honor, I shouldn't have shot off my face. It was contempt of court."

"Apology accepted," the judge said. He was an understanding man who made allowance for human weakness, up to a certain point. "The witness will proceed."

"I searched a sled load of pelts," Moose Mullen continued, "and found several wolf hides, along with marten, mink—and beaver that I knew come from Squaw Valley."

Jim opened a package and handed the witness a beaver pelt. "Identify this, please."

PRODUCED BY SFZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's the pelt of Bloody Bill Rodent," Moose said.

A sourdough whispered to another: "There was a perfesser cuss up here once, and he claimed a beaver was a rodent, like a rat. Some of us argued beavers was beavers and rats was rats. This perfesser was teched in the head—studyin' beavers, beaver dams and sech. It was him named Bloody Bill Rodent—"

The judge banged the gavel for quiet and the sourdough choked back the remainder.

"Bloody Bill Rodent was a famous beaver," Moose continued. "His pelt is all scarred up. Some scars came from fighting, and others from being caught in traps. A wolf clawed him once. I found Bloody Bill's pelt in a bale of fresh-taken beaver pelts. Proof that one pelt at least came from the Squaw River country. I'll swear that most of the others was, too. A fur buyer will back me up. Finest beaver in the world come from there."

"That's all," Jim answered. "Cross-examine?"

Max Adams' lawyer gave the game warden a fine going-over, but failed to shake the testimony in any way. Other witnesses also testified that the pelts in question came from the Squaw Valley country. When court adjourned that evening Jim's case was about finished.

Jim gathered up his papers and headed for his cabin. A few minutes later Max came in. Max stared a long time at Jim's papers—documents that threatened to help the law deprive him of his freedom.

"I have my inning tomorrow, Jim," he said bitterly. "But what the devil can I do? I can only deny it."

"We aren't going to talk of the case here," Jim said quietly. "This is home."

"A hell of a home—a house divided against itself," Max retorted savagely. It was his turn to prepare the evening meal, and he went about it, muttering to himself. Finally he exploded. "It's easy enough for you not to worry. The most you can lose is a case. But damn it all, I'm losing my liberty, my girl—"

"If Martha loves you, she'll stick. If she's convinced of your innocence, she'll stick."

"And what about the guy I've been partners with for three years?" Max demanded. "You aren't sticking. We agreed to stick through thick and thin when we came North. You had a lot of ideas about being a district court judge sometime, maybe even get on the United States Supreme Court. I had ideas about treating fur as a crop, improving the breed. I was going to have a string of posts all over Alaska someday. 'Adams Furs' were going to mean the finest that could be bought. That dream is shot. Now I'm fighting against my own partner to stay out of McNeil Island pen."

"I'm a patient guy," Jim said, setting the table. "I've tried to make it clear to you that I'm two people. One, James McCord, an assistant United States district attorney. The other, Jim McCord, Max Adam's best friend. I swore to do certain specific duties when I took office, and I've got

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to carry them out. I can't disregard the evidence that Moose Mullen brought in."

Max measured coffee into the pot, and tossed in a couple of egg shells mechanically. He punched two holes in a tin of milk and put it on the table. "Even you look bad," he argued. "We're in the same boat. According to the evidence, if you convict me it will prove you had been letting me slip contraband furs by."

"Possibly," admitted Jim, "but it's more than likely the jury will conclude that you were putting something over on me. That I was sort of dumb or had too much confidence in a friend."

"Listen, Jim, Trapper's Valley is plenty tough, as everyone knows," Max said. "But a man can get rich there in a hurry if he isn't killed. I say that I'm innocent. I say that I was framed—that somebody planted Bloody Bill's pelt, along with others, in my pack. Why don't you prove *that?* Why don't you find the real guilty party and go after him?"

"If you were framed," Jim said, "it's up to you to prove it in court. And if there's someone else who is guilty, it's up to the game warden to arrest him and bring the evidence of guilt to me. I'll prosecute him with a hell of a lot more enthusiasm than I have for the United States vs. Max Adams."

"Bunk!" snorted Max. "My guess is that you're playing a smooth game yourself. You think a hell of a lot of Martha—"

"We'll leave her out of it," Jim said hotly, his face flushing deeply.

"You haven't denied that you think a lot of her," Max insisted.

"Nor I won't deny it," Jim said flatly, "but she's my best friend's girl and I don't cut in on my friends."

"We're not friends any more and you know it damned well," Max declared. "How many more witnesses are going to testify against me? Or is that something you can't tell?"

"One more," replied Jim. "Big Oliver Shultz."

"That double-crosser," Max jeered. "I'll say this much for you, you make a job of it when you go after a man. You step on my body, then climb onto the next man. If you convict Teabone Hathaway of murder, you're made." He pondered on this a minute. "I'd like to bet right now, Jim, that you'll find some way of getting out of prosecuting Teabone. You could lose that case, and then you wouldn't loom up as such an important man."

"Yes," Jim agreed, holding back his temper, "a man can make or break himself on that one."

"Well, let's eat," Max said ungraciously.

That evening Jim cleaned up the dishes, then turned to his papers, while Max smoked steadily and brooded on the trial. Regardless of which way he turned, Jim apparently had him fenced in. It reminded him of the time the wolves caught him in upper Trapper Valley. They were hungry enough to want to bring down a creature they instinctively feared—a man. Several tried the wolf trick of pretending to attack him from the front while another

DIGITIZED BY GNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sneaked up from behind to hamstring him.

Max had seen the creature's shadow out of the corner of his eye, and had whirled in time to drive his ax blade half through the skull. Things had looked bad then, but somehow he had managed to escape. There seemed to be no escape this time, though. He wondered what Big Oliver Shultz would have to say. He couldn't see where Big Oliver fitted into the picture.

II

Early the following morning Jim put Big Oliver on the witness stand. Shultz was a massive, shifty-eyed man who spoke slowly as if fearing his own words might trap him.

"Tell in your own way, Shultz," Jim said, "what happened in Squaw Valley."

"I went up Trapper Valley, through Windy Pass and into Squaw Valley," Big Oliver began.

"Why?" demanded Jim. "You knew the valley was closed to all trapping. It's hardly a place a man would go to just for exercise."

"I agreed last year to supply a certain number of beaver pelts to a Seattle furrier," Big Oliver said. "Then Moose Mullen closed the valley to trapping. That left me out on a limb. I was sore and I figgered somebody might sneak in and get some of them prime beaver hides. I made up my mind, Moose Mullen havin' more'n he can do, that I'd keep an eye on things. If I couldn't have them pelts myself, by golly nobody else was going to have 'em, so I went in to check up on things."

"What'd you find?" Jim asked.

"I saw Max Adams' tracks," answered Shultz. "They led straight to beaver houses where he'd set traps. The reason I know is because I saw Max Adams make them tracks, and set them traps. I figgered I'd tell Moose Mullen, but Moose was on the job and caught Adams with the goods. I told you I'd testify, McCord, because I wanted to make sure Max, or any other blasted poacher, went over the road."

"Cross-examine?" Jim asked Adams' lawyer.

"If Your Honor please," Max said, "I'll cross-examine this witness, though I realize that when a man acts as his own lawyer he has a fool for a client."

Adams' lawyer looked surprised at his client's decision but said nothing.

"Shultz," Max said, "you've fought game wardens for the last ten years. You've been convicted of poaching several times, and have served jail terms. You've been opposed to closing down over-trapped areas to let them build up. Isn't that the truth of the matter?"

"Yes," Shultz admitted.

"You wanted to get yours, and the devil with the other fellow?"

Shultz squirmed, but he was well aware that his reputation was known. "That's the way the other trappers felt about it," he said lamely. "But I've changed my idears. I see that lettin' the game build up is the right deal."

"Hm. Reformed," Max commented. "You were convicted of perjury in a trial last year?"

ARCHIVED BY NZSTM
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It was either change the truth a little, or double-cross a friend," Shultz said. "But I ain't got no friends here. You've never been no friend of mine."

"I'm happy to say that you're telling the truth in this instance," Max said. "We've never been friends." He glanced at the jury and then said: "That's all, Shultz."

A half hour later Max took the stand in his own defense. The time passed swiftly. The crowd hardly stirred as Max Adams and Jim McCord went at it hammer and tongs. The physical free-for-all that so many had predicted had turned to a matching of wits. Tongues, not fists, dealt the blows. Both men looked tired and drawn when court adjourned. Tomorrow the judge would instruct the jury and the decision would be in its hands.

That night Jim cooked dinner and Max cleaned up afterwards. Neither spoke until shortly before turning in, then Max said suddenly: "Let's cut cards for the cabin. High card wins."

"Why?"

"Because if I'm acquitted, this cabin isn't big enough to hold the two of us," Max explained. "If I'm high card, it'll be mine. If I'm found guilty and still hold the high card, I can sell the place and have money enough for an appeal to a higher court."

"And if you're low card?"

Max shrugged his shoulders. "Aren't you sport enough to take a chance?" he taunted. "Must you always play a sure thing?"

Jim got out a deck, checked to make sure all the cards were there, then handed it to Max who shuffled the cards, then handed the deck to Jim.

"Cut," he said.

Jim turned up the seven of clubs.

Max steadied his hand with an effort and turned up the trey of hearts.

"Draw up a quitclaim deed to the cabin, and I'll sign it," he said quietly. "When hard luck gets a man down, it never lets up on him. Okay, I'm declared innocent or guilty. Either way, I'll start from scratch."

The jury filed out solemnly and the judge asked: "Have you reached a verdict?"

"We have," answered the foreman. He handed a sealed paper to the clerk, who glanced at it and gave it to the judge.

The word "Guilty!" sent a gasp through the room. Someone congratulated Jim. Others expressed sympathy for Max. The judge lost no time in pronouncing sentence, a year in prison.

"You will be escorted to prison by the United States marshal when he leaves with the next batch of prisoners, Mr. Adams," the judge added. "Mr. McCord, when will you be prepared to prosecute Teabone Hathaway?"

The room was suddenly still. Here was the case Alaska had been waiting for. It lacked the human interest of a district attorney prosecuting his best friend as Jim had done, but, because of the money behind Hathaway and the vast gold-mining claims he had been looting, the case would attract national attention.

Jim McCord drew a deep breath.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jim McCord

"Your Honor, Teabone Hathaway has requested additional time in which to prepare his case. I join in that request for a postponement to give my successor time to make suitable preparation. I . . . am resigning as deputy district attorney for reasons I deem sufficient."

The judge looked amazed, but only for a moment. Then he said: "The defendant's request for additional time will be granted."

Max Adams, standing in the doorway, smiled bitterly. "That's Jim McCord all over," he said. "He makes a Roman holiday out of me, but when it comes to a tough one, he dogs it. I'd rather be Max Adams headed for a stretch in prison, than Jim McCord, free."

Jim made no answer. Max was in the marshal's custody once more, the unknown bondsman had been released of all obligation. The marshal escorted the prisoner to the cabin so he could pack his personal belongings and move them to storage. Then Max was shown to his cell.

Before the door even closed on Max, Felix Crimm, a lawyer, served papers on him.

"Now what?" Max inquired wearily.

"You promised to deliver certain pelts to Barton & Company," said Crimm. "You put up a bond as evidence of good faith. This action forfeits the bond."

"You go to hell!" Max said savagely. "I've until next April to deliver those pelts."

"But you're going to jail—"

"I might break out," retorted Max. "Or Santa Claus might bring me enough pelts . . . or the world might come to an end and it wouldn't make any difference to anyone." Then he decided to bluff. "Wait, I'll accept service. You can go ahead and forfeit the bond, but if I can make delivery, I'll sue you from hell to breakfast."

He watched conflicting emotions pass over Crimm's face. The lawyer hadn't thought of that angle, and he realized there was much in what Max said.

"Why," Crimm thought, "he could *buy* pelts, deliver them to us, break even on the cost of the pelts, and then sue us besides." He returned the papers to his brief case. "You're right, Adams, we can't—"

"You can't get away with it," Max cut in.

Crimm left the jail, muttering to himself. He hated to lose the fee involved on the bond foreclosure. He was puzzled, too, because Jim McCord had resigned. Jim, he was sure,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was up to something that was vastly more important to him than the district attorney job—something that meant big money. And if big money was around, Felix Crimm wanted to cut in on it.

A couple of days later the lawyer stumbled onto the answer. He went directly to the jail and was taken to Max Adams' cell. "Adams," he said, "I know why Jim McCord worked so hard to put you on ice for awhile."

"Why?" Max asked.

"I saw him talking pretty confidential to Martha Ramstad," Crimm replied. "They see plenty of each other, as you well know. Now here's the dirty part of the deal. Jim's grabbing your trap line. I saw him hitching up a dog team, and later he took on a load of trail grub."

"What does he know about trapping?" demanded Max.

"Any Alaskan lawyer will tell you he's plenty smart," Crimm replied. "He went along with you lots of times when you ran your trap line. He's watched you and he's helped out."

Max nodded, more to himself than to Crimm. "I don't believe it!" he said after a moment's reflection. "McCord's cold-blooded where law is concerned, but he wouldn't pull that kind of a deal. He lives for law, not for fur. That's my business."

"Put me on your payroll," Crimm suggested, "and I'll shake him down for what's yours by rights."

"Anything for a dollar," Max said in disgust.

"Take a look out your cell window," Crimm suggested softly. "I just heard Jim yell 'Mush' at his dogs."

Max Adams walked over to the window. It afforded a fair view of the street. Jim McCord, dressed for the trail, was at the gee pole of a heavily loaded sled. The dogs had just broken the runners from the frozen surface and were building up momentum. Standing nearby, watching the departure, was Martha Ramstad.

"The devil with you," Max said to Crimm. "The devil with . . . everything." He sat down on his bunk and lit a cigarette. "I'm trapped," he muttered, "and the trap is going to leave scars. They won't show, as they did on Bloody Bill, but they'll be there."

III

Jim McCord mushed up Trapper River's ice and stopped at Max Adams' main cabin. It had a deserted look.—A raw wind was piling up snow in heavy drifts on one side, and clearing the hard, frozen ground on the other.

"I'm the first man here," Jim told himself with satisfaction. "I'd have bet a hundred dollars that Big Oliver Shultz would try to cut in ahead of me, and take over." He secured the dogs, then put his weight against the door. It opened slowly, the rusty hinges protesting.

The air should have been damp and stale, but there was a vague odor of tobacco smoke and a faint suggestion of warmth, as if there had been a fire in the stove within the last twenty-four hours. Jim felt the stove and found it cold. He stepped

REPRODUCED BY UMI.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

outside and looked at the chimney. It was drifted over with snow, proving that it hadn't smoked in some time.

He examined the floor carefully and discovered soot. Then he noticed that a window had been opened. The ice sealing the cracks on other windows was missing from the window nearest the stove. Jim looked at the stovepipe joints. They had recently been unjointed. And suddenly Jim realized that someone had used the stove, piping the smoke through the window, thus leaving the drift on the chimney top untouched.

"A smooth way to trick a man into thinking he got here first," Jim mused. "Well, if this is a trap, I might as well pretend to walk into it."

He climbed to the roof, cleared the chimney, then built a fire. In every respect he acted as if he felt himself the first man to come into the region since Max Adams' arrest.

He spent the remainder of the day overhauling the few traps Max had left in the cabin, cooked himself a good meal, then turned in. He even lay in the lower bunk awhile, reading by candlelight, then blew out the flame. Then he removed the sleeping bag from the bunk, spread it on the floor against the door, and awaited results. Something might happen, or the night might pass without incident. He had no means of knowing.

He awakened with a start, convinced that a rifle shot had aroused him. For several minutes he listened, then crawled toward the nearest window. Vaguely he saw a round hole, from which radiated cracks. He crawled over the floor to the bunk. A bullet had gone through the wooden side, and would have stopped in the chest of anyone sleeping there.

"Presumably," he mused, "whoever fired the shot figures that I'm probably bleeding to death about now. Maybe he'll investigate. A wounded man, naturally, would try to do something for himself—light a candle, stir up the fire for warmth, and probably attempt to repair damages. A dead man would do exactly nothing."

He crawled into the sleeping bag, placed his six-gun where he could reach it easily, and waited. Several times he thought he heard movement outside, but he wasn't sure because of the wind moaning around the eaves.

"I'm out of my element," Jim muttered, "and there are two strikes against me for that reason. But I do know how criminals react to certain situations. I've tried enough of them. Whoever it is struck at night, which suggests that he's afraid to strike daytimes. The very act of trying to shoot a sleeping man proves that he's yellow."

At daybreak Jim got into the bunk, sighted through the holes in the side board and window pane. This gave him the bullet's course. "Obviously the cuss had the situation figured out," Jim mused, "and lashed the gun in place after aiming it. Then all he had to do was pull the trigger."

The weapon had been fired from a nearby thicket. A three-hundred-foot ridge loomed up behind the thicket. Making up a pack, Jim started up

DIGITIZED BY GOOGLE
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

river a half hour later, but a quarter of a mile from the cabin he cached the pack, circled, and climbed the ridge from the opposite side. Cautiously approaching the crest, he looked down on the thicket, hoping to flush out his attacker. The man was a smooth one because he had left in plenty of time to allow drifting snow to cover his tracks. Apparently weeks had passed since a human being had been near the thicket.

Jim went down and examined the trees. He found a tree crotch with scarred bark showing signs that a rifle had been wired into place. A sapling just beyond had supported the muzzle. And to prevent it moving in the wind, additional wires had anchored it to convenient roots. Wires, rifle and empty cartridge were gone.

Jim cut an evergreen branch and, sweeping it back and forth, uncovered moccasin prints left by the man when he fired the rifle.

"Interesting," he mused, "and it's too bad I can't dig them up and take them into court as Exhibit A." He studied them a moment, and grinned. "There's more than one way of skinning a cat," he murmured. "As long as I'm in the trapping business, I might as well skin this particular cat. And I know the would-be killer's name, too."

The "skinning" occupied most of the day, and required a couple of trips to the cabin.

The next morning before dawn, Jim headed up river. Without difficulty he located Max Adams' traps cached in trees, and he did a fair job of setting them. He spent the first night in a line cabin—a log shelter eight feet long, four feet high and six feet wide containing canned supplies, a bunk of "spruce feathers" and a Yukon stove. Shelter and not comfort was the main purpose, and similar structures scattered along the river told that as far as Max Adams was concerned, this trap line was to be permanent—that he planned to take no more than the normal increase of fur.

Jim contented himself with setting traps seventeen miles upstream and getting the feel of the country. Max had predicted that the take in this part of the river would be poor.

"A man will have to go higher up," he had said, "where he can run into plenty of grief. He should know the country or the odds will be all against him. But that's where the real trapping is."

"Tomorrow," Jim concluded as he was returning to the cabin after the second week of trapping, "I'll move to the headwaters and stay until the breakup."

About five miles from the cabin he swung off to look at a trap. A prime silver fox was in it. As Jim hurried toward the trap something swished viciously, jerking him off his feet and an instant later he was swinging back and forth several feet above ground like a pendulum.

Someone had bent down a tree to look like a windfall. A rope attached near the end had been covered by drifting snow. When Jim stepped through a loop, his foot had touched a concealed trigger which had released the rope holding the

PRODUCED BY UMZ ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bent tree. The tree had snapped upward, and the noose, tightening around Jim's foot had jerked him into the air.

Now, held by one foot, Jim swayed slowly back and forth, his parka around his head and shoulders, the biting wind already at work on his hips. He pushed the parka from his face and looked around, half expecting a bullet, or the mocking laughter of some man who wanted the river to himself—Oliver Shultz or trappers backed by Crimm who rarely missed a bet. He got a good look at the fox. It was dead, and this very fact opened up a field of speculation.

The fox hadn't been there when Jim went up river. Unless it was a sick fox to begin with, it should have easily survived the intervening hours. Jim had never seen a larger, nor healthier-looking fox. A man seeing it in the trap would instinctively realize he had got himself a prize pelt and run forward—as Jim had done. He realized now that the fox had been bait to lure him into the snare. The snare had been set on the path a man would instinctively follow. Had he gone to right or left he would have had to push through thickets of frozen brush and drifted snow.

The outcome was obvious. Circulation cut off, Jim's foot would freeze. Slowly the frost would work up his leg and into his body. And whoever set the snare would merely have to wait for the cold to do its work. Later he could easily report that he had found Jim McCord's body frozen on the trail. An examination would show no signs of violence, for the heavy wool socks and the moosehide moccasins would protect the flesh from bruising.

"He knows I'm on the trail," Jim mused. "He'll watch the cabin, and if I don't show up he'll have a look, guessing what happened. Then, and only then, will he approach the body. A killer who would shoot a sleeping man would be cautious in all things. And I'll be stiffer'n a board before morning."

He kept pushing up the parka, which persisted in falling over his head and shoulders. He tried swinging his body back and forth, but could never work up enough momentum to put the tree within reach. It still curved like a fish pole, and Jim felt like a fish. He managed to work his light pack clear of his shoulders, but held onto it and groped until he found a light line coiled in the bottom. He had brought it along to help him down steep slopes if need be, never dreaming of this emergency. He fastened one end of the line to the pack and the other to his right wrist and began swinging back and forth. When he gained a maximum of momentum he gave the pack a heave and dropped it over the tree, paying out the line as his body swung back.

The line slid several inches along the trunk and lodged against a snag. Slowly, hand over hand, Jim hauled himself up to the tree. He got his leg over the trunk and rested. Then he released the loop around his foot, slid to the ground and limped around. Slowly the blood in his foot began to circulate.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Now what?" Jim asked himself. "There isn't much chance of proving who pulled off this trick. When the guilty man *does* show up to check on things I can get the drop on him. He can deny he had anything to do with the snare. I'm lawyer enough to know that I'd have one hell of a time proving it. Max was right. This is one tough country, and when you have men working against you, it's almost too tough."

He made camp nearby, eating cold food. He slept until daybreak, then climbed a nearby ridge. The sky was leaden and occasionally it spit grains of snow, but he could see a mile up and downstream. A breeze kept the fallen snow moving, filling in tracks within a few minutes after they were made.

At eleven o'clock he saw a man coming up the river. Jim hurried to the tree, climbed it, and slipped the loop around his foot. He waited until he heard a brittle branch snap as a shoulder brushed against it, then let himself quietly swing downward. His parka fell around head and shoulders, but he held up an edge and watched the nearest thicket. Suddenly he saw the man's head and shoulders moving behind the leafless brush. The fur parka facing completely hid his features. Apparently he was staring at Jim's slowly turning body. Jim pretended to reach for the loop to indicate he was alive.

There was no reaction. The man stood there. "That's all the proof I need," Jim thought. "He's going to let me swing until I freeze to death." He let the parka bunch around his shoulders again, and under its concealment pulled off his right mitt, then drew his six-gun from a shoulder holster. He waited until his slowly turning body was in line with the man. Then he called: "Put 'em up!"

Surprise froze the man for a split second, then he went for his own gun. Jim fired and the man dropped. Jim could take no chances now on pulling himself to the limb. He fired at the line holding his foot and cut it where it went over the limb. He tried to turn and land on hands and knees, but the next instant a roar filled his ears and blackness engulfed him.

IV

Slowly Jim opened his eyes. His head ached and the woods and snow were a confused mass of black and white. He was on the ground, half covered with snow. He stirred slowly, expecting broken bones or stabbing pains.

"I figured I was a damned cat and could turn quickly enough to land on my hands and knees," he grumbled. "Instead I fell on my head and knocked myself out. But why didn't that cuss get the jump on me? Or did I kill him?"

He looked toward the thicket, but a log about ten feet away partly obscured the view. He remembered that he had planned to drop, work his way to the log, and with it for protection shoot it out with the killer, or force him to give up.

After several minutes of clawing through the snow he found his gun. He cleaned the barrel and then ad-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vanced. Unbroken snow lay beyond the thicket. He broke off a branch and began brushing it aside. He found bloodstained snow that had turned to ice lumps. The man had gone down, struggled to his feet, and from the way the moccasin toes had dug in, he had done some running.

Jim started for the ridge, hoping to sight his quarry, but things began to blur and a fog rolled over him. He sat down and waited for his head to clear, then returned to the snare. Slowly he repacked his outfit and took the fox from the trap. He was personally entitled to that expensive bit of bait, he reasoned; it had almost cost him his life.

"I'll save it for a certain girl," he mused. "It'll look fine around her shoulders."

He found the main cabin cold, and the frozen salmon that he had left for the dogs was eaten. He allowed himself several days to rest, then, with sled loaded with grub, drove to the river's headwaters, picking up traps as he came to them.

Here the timber was thinner, the logs smaller. The river became a series of small creeks meandering through almost level country. Beavers had cut trees from the low banks and made a chain of ponds which in summer were alive with trout and spawning salmon. Adjoining swamps, now brown or snow-covered, were nesting grounds each summer for thousands of mallards.

Max Adams had cut a large supply of fuel, which had dried in the long summer days and been stacked under a shed. Here, as elsewhere it was evident that Max had planned on a long-scale operation. On the wall he had carved in the logs:

WARNING!

When Old Baldy's "Feather" Points North —Clear Out! The Breakup Is Near!

Jim remembered Max saying: "It stays cold up there longer, and so fur is prime longer. There's a temptation to stay. Give in to that temptation, and you'll have trouble getting out. You see, it's thawing in the lower country and snowslides are spilling into the canyons."

Jim found plenty of wolf tracks in the vicinity of the beaver houses, and he set traps for the pelts. There was a bounty, also, on each wolf, plus the satisfaction of reducing the numbers of the killers.

The beaver houses had been drenched with rain, which had frozen to a depth of several inches, and each was like a small fort. Only man could break into them.

The weeks passed swiftly. This was the cleanup that Max Adams had been waiting for. There were better pelts in the Squaw River country, but most of the ones Jim was taking would grade within a few points of the Squaw River beaver hides. Now and then Jim added fox and marten to the catch. He drove himself when in the cabin, stretching hides on the boards; and he drove himself on the trail, taking in as wide an area as possible.

He awakened one morning and looked up at Old Baldy towering fifty miles away. The "feather"—blowing snow—was pointing in a

PRODUCED BY OCLC.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

northerly direction, which meant a warm, south wind was moving into the country.

"Another day or two should net a couple of hundred dollars," Jim muttered. "I'll gamble!"

He visited the traps and reset them, running the line in eighteen hours. After a brief rest, he covered the line for the last time, picking up sets and fur, giving the dog team little rest. He checked on the catch—fifteen thousand dollars' worth of pelts at any of the Cold Deck trading posts. They'd be worth more at Seattle, San Francisco or New York.

While Jim was making up the packs into bales, the Chinook came. The warm wind brought rains in torrents, and even the temperature began rising. Some of the rain froze before it reached the ground, then it turned to wet snow, and finally raw rain drops. Jim hastily loaded the sled and started downstream at night.

Within an hour the sled runners were in water, and only Jim's shoepacs kept his feet dry. The moccasin season was over. The dogs needed no urging.

"You might think the dogs had read that warning in the cabin," Jim mused. "They're sure moving."

Now and then one of the dogs would look back and whimper. And once the leader gave a mournful howl as if warning of death and disaster. Jim kept going until nearly noon, then pulled into a side canyon and camped on a bar. The dogs dropped in their tracks.

The sun came out and, as the snowfields began thawing, he could hear slides thundering into the canyon. He waited all that afternoon, and well into night for water running over the ice to go down. It ran a foot deep at midnight, and then he admitted defeat. He turned the dogs loose and the leader started down the canyon, as if all hell were after him. The others were at his heels. Freed of the sled, they could leap or swim the bad spots, and make their way along the banks and gravel bars.

Jim cut saplings and bent them into the shape of a boat. He lashed them securely with rawhide thongs and rope and covered the frame with a tarp. He gave the tarp a quick coating of grease to make it watertight, then carried it to a point on the bank well above high water mark. After that, he waited for the breakup.

It wasn't long in coming. Jim cached every unnecessary pound of equipment in convenient trees, then loaded the fur into the boat and pushed off. Most of the ice had gone out, but melting snowfields in the back country filled the canyons from wall to wall with a muddy torrent.

A short run brought him to the river. The scene ahead was enough to crack the toughest man's nerve. Rocks that he had skirted coming in over the ice, now stood amid boiling pools. Waterfalls filled the canyon with mists as they dropped hundreds of feet over sheer cliffs. Slides occasionally spilled tons of snow from steep granite slopes, leaving them naked for another summer.

There was no retreat. Jim, sitting

PRODUCED BY UNT.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the stern of his makeshift craft, drove through the first white water with an improvised paddle. Bobbing ice would have splintered a wooden boat, but the canvas and frames kept "giving" with each impact.

Above the river's growl Jim heard the thunder of a slide. He could see it rushing down a slope to the canyon's brink. It wasn't a particularly large mass, but a ten-pound chunk of ice would go straight through the boat. Sweat poured from Jim's face as he tried to drive the boat behind a rock. For a moment he held it there, bow against the rock, stern swinging back and forth as he tried to keep it against the current. He didn't look up, but he saw the river churn as the mass fell. Then the current swung him around and he went downstream stern first. The ice and snow mass pressed in on all sides as it carried him along. He pushed away the larger blocks of ice and tried to protect the canvas from the ragged edges. It was cold, but sweat poured down his face, and his muscles stood out like cords as he battled.

"A lawyer should stay with his summons and complaints and not tackle the trapper's game," he panted. "This should be a lesson to me, but I like it." His strength lasted until he was through the canyon, then he almost collapsed. His arms were leaden, and his breath came in gasps. A boxer can rest between rounds, but there had been no rest for Jim. Not for an instant, in the twenty minutes the frail craft had been in the canyon, had he relaxed.

"I used up ten years' luck, too," he added wryly.

There were other bad moments, but nothing that equaled the one in the big canyon. The day was long, and Jim made it through to the main cabin, arriving in twilight. He tied the boat securely and turned in. Nothing had been disturbed during his long absence up river. It looked as if those who had had their eyes on Max Adams' trapping grounds had given up the idea.

V

Jim went on the next day, letting the river do most of the work. The day he turned the boat into the Cold Deck landing, Moose Mullen was on hand to meet him. The game warden greeted him coldly, but he checked the furs.

"Okay," he growled. "You know, McCord, I like a double-crosser, but you suit me too well. You done your duty in sending your best friend over the road, then you jump his ground. It was legal, but . . . why don't you go off somewhere and die?"

Without answering, Jim packed the furs to his cabin, then dropped in at Flapjack Meehan's for a meal. The tall, lean sourdough greeted him as coldly as the game warden had done, but served him.

"Your dogs came in, McCord," he said, "we figgered you'd been lost up river." Flapjack's voice contained a note of regret.

Jim did nothing for several days, then he called on the deputy United States marshal, Sam Nokes.

"Sam, I want to swear out a warrant for Big Oliver Shultz," he said.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Attempted murder. I was the victim. Shultz just came into town."

Sam shook his head in amazement. He knew that Shultz had spent most of the winter in his cabin, seven miles from town. While the cabin was off the main trail, sourdoughs had seen a light in his window nightly, proof that Shultz was there.

But when he arrested Big Oliver, the shocked expression on the man's face, puzzled the marshal. It set him to thinking. Then Big Oliver hired Felix Crimm to defend him.

Once again the courtroom was crowded. Jim McCord started the fireworks when he said: "Your honor, I charge that this defendant framed my partner, Max Adams, by—"

"I object," Crimm shouted. "The defendant is not on trial for framing Max Adams."

"The defendant is charged with conspiracy as well as with attempted murder, a part of that conspiracy," Jim argued, "and my evidence is proper."

"Objection overruled," the judge said. "Proceed."

"Shultz wanted Max Adams' trapping ground for himself. He framed Adams by planting Bloody Bill Rodent's pelt in Adams' fur catch," Jim continued. "Then when I moved in, he tried to shoot me, supposing I was sleeping in a bunk. Here's a clay impression of his moccasin print left when he fired the rifle. I warmed clay in the cabin, softened it up, then worked it into the track, which was frozen solid. I brought the mess to the cabin and let the ice melt, with this result. I wish to enter this as Exhibit A."

Crimm protested but the clay impression was admitted as evidence.

"As deputy district attorney," Jim continued, "I had no choice but to prosecute my best friend to the limit, with the evidence provided. But once the job was done, I was free to resign and investigate the case. I was also free to do what Adams couldn't do—carry out his plans for fur cropping, trap and fill his orders and save the forfeiture of his bond. This I did, which surprised the defendant Shultz and forced him to continue action against me."

"How do you know it was Shultz?" demanded Crimm.

"Exhibit B will prove that," Jim answered. "Failing to kill me at the cabin, he tried again. With a superb dog fox as bait, he set a snare. I took the bait." He smiled grimly and explained in detail what had happened. The courtroom spectators were leaning forward in their seats, listening intently. Shultz grew pale.

"Obviously," Jim concluded, "any man but a potential killer would have have instantly rushed forward and cut me down. Shultz knew that I was alive, yet stood there, and only left when I fired a shot."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Prove it!" Crimm shouted. "You said that this man's face was concealed by the fur of his parka hood. You admitted that it wasn't any special kind of parka. A dozen trappers wanted Adams' trapping ground. Why pick on my client?"

"In proof," Jim replied, "I offer at this time Shultz's own body as Exhibit B. If he's guilty, it'll show a recently healed bullet wound. If he's innocent, his body will bear no recent scars."

All eyes turned on Shultz. His big hands worked nervously, fingers pulling at fingers. He kept licking his lips. Jim had been in his trap. Now he was in Jim's trap. Sweat began pouring down his face.

"I'd like to talk with my lawyer," he said hoarsely.

"Very well," the judge agreed.

The two stepped into an empty room, and came out almost immediately. Crimm stopped beside Jim. "Shultz will plead guilty to conspiracy if you'll forget the attempted murder charge," the lawyer whispered. "He's got the bullet scar and admits it."

"Okay," Jim agreed, "get in there and enter your plea."

Outside of the court room Jim was talking with Martha Ramstad.

"Here's part of Max's last letter," the girl said. "Read it."

Jim took the letter out of the envelope and read:

I've had a chance to think things over, and realize Jim had no choice but to prosecute me. I hear that he's running my trap line. Perhaps I'm a fool, but I can't believe that he'd double-cross me any more than he'd cut in on my girl. I owe you both an apology for not thinking straight.

Jim gave the letter back. "I figured he'd straighten things out in time," he said.

"But why didn't you prosecute Shultz on the attempted murder charge?" asked Martha.

"I wanted him to admit that he had framed Max by planting Bloody Bill's pelt in his fur catch," Jim explained. "Now Max will be released and his record cleared. That was the important thing. Besides, Max and you have suffered. He's lost time in jail, and your honeymoon was postponed, too. The money Shultz would have spent defending himself on the attempted murder charge is still in the bank. Okay, Max can bring a suit for damages suffered as a result of the conspiracy, and collect."

"Will you act as our lawyer, Jim?" asked Martha, smiling. "You put up the bail money secretly. You solved the case. You're going to be best man at the wedding. And you're giving me that fox pelt as a wedding present. You might as well go all the way, be our lawyer and get yourself the fee."

Jim shook his head. "I'm afraid that's out," he grinned. "You see, Uncle Sam wants me back as his lawyer—to prosecute Teabone Hathaway—and I'm accepting the job."

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

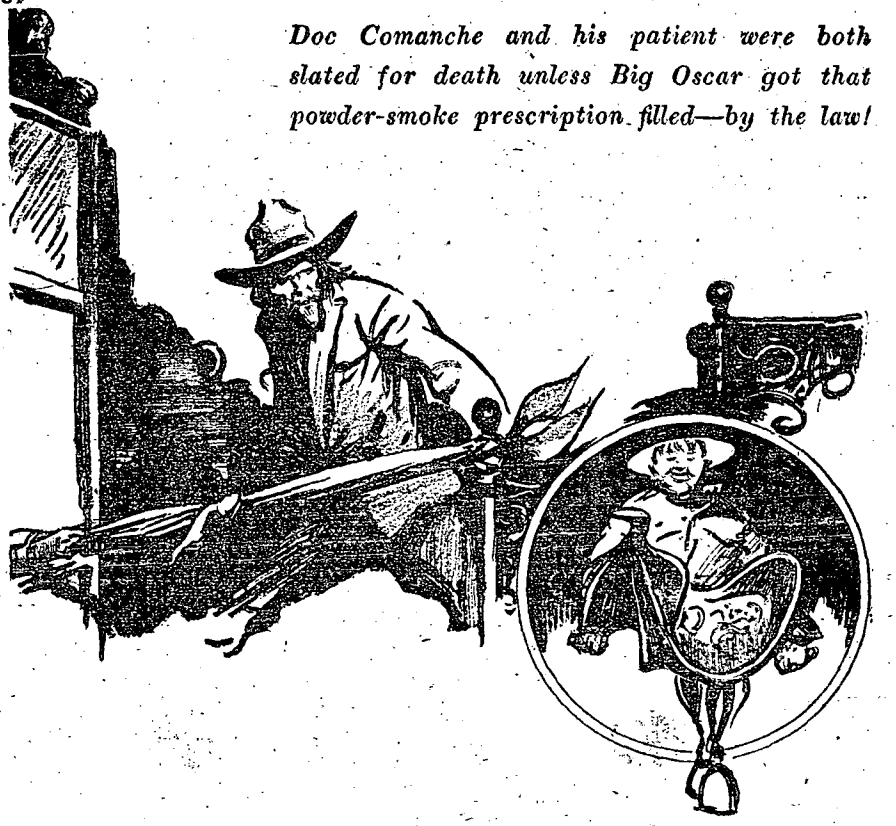
Pack animals, with their seemingly inborn knack of being ornery, contributed no little to the Western packer's wondrous string of plain and fancy cuss words. Hobbling pack horses was always a night-time "must" on long pack trips. But even hobbled, pack animals grazing at night can and do travel surprising distances. For this reason experienced packers usually stake one or two horses at the best nearby pasture when setting up their evening camp. This cuts down the tendency of the hobbled animals to wander. More importantly, a picketed horse is assurance the packer will have an animal to saddle in case he does have to hunt up strays.

In stepping off distances in unsurveyed, wilderness country most prospectors consider 2,000 paces to the mile close enough for rough measurement. Timber cruisers count 1,000 paces to the mile, because they count only every *second pace; that is, just the right or left foot,* thus getting a double pace for every count. The system is advantageous in pacing long distances. As a further check and count saver, such woodsmen often carry a handful of pebbles, dropping one in their coat pocket at every hundred double paces.

Sheepmen think of everything these days. Two recently developed breeds of woolies, the Columbia and the Targhee, are growing in popularity in the sheep sections of Wyoming, Idaho, the Dakotas, and Montana. Half a million Columbias are reported on Montana ranges alone. These new sheep are scientifically designed to bring meatier legs of lamb to market. They are notably aggressive feeders because, say experts of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, they are bangless, or openface, types. With no wool dropping over their eyes, they see more, eat more, and turn out more lamb chops.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Doc Comanche and his patient were both slated for death unless Big Oscar got that powder-smoke prescription filled—by the law!

DOC COMANCHE'S TROUBLESOME TRAIL

by NORMAN A. FOX

WHEN a man put a town behind him between suns, making a surreptitious departure to avoid the closing tentacles of trouble, he had a right to expect comparative peace. Thus reflected Doc Comanche, that veteran pitchman, as he and big Oscar Lund, his assistant, wended westward out of Eldridge, the pair of them perched on the creaky seat of the old sway-backed Conestoga that was their hearth and home as well as

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a mobile advertisement for the New & Improved Indian Medicine they dispensed. And so reflecting, Doc Comanche sighed. The breaking dawn had found them many miles beyond Eldridge town and the first light revealed more trouble than had lain along the back trail. Seemingly there was no justice under the sun.

"This don't look good, huh, Doc?" said big Oscar.

For a fact, it didn't. Rolling prairie stretched to the horizons, but its bleakness was broken by bluffs, and the Conestoga had rounded one to place its passengers before a neat two-room shack which was flanked by a corral and smaller buildings. A ranch, this, or a farm more likely, barren with the blight of poverty. In the yard a thin, calico-clad woman tugged to draw a ponderous trunk farther from the shack, while a little bare-legged girl helped her. Other household furnishings stood in the yard, and there was a man here, too, a gaunt, beak-nosed man who was sloshing kerosene against the shack. And even as Comanche tugged on the reins, the man, too intent upon his business to notice the pitchman's approach, made a torch out of wadded paper and struck a match to it.

"He's gonna fire the place!" decided big Oscar, who was not noted for quickness of thought. "He's too big to be playing with matches, huh, Doc? We gonna do something about it?"

For a fleeting moment Comanche remembered Eldridge and wished himself there. True, there'd been a saddle in Eldridge, a handsome, silver-inlaid saddle, not kept under lock and key as such a treasure should be, but left perched upon the hitchrail before the store that offered it for sale—left where any man, so minded, might have helped himself. Oscar Lund had coveted that saddle with a lust that was not lessened by the fact that he and Comanche possessed no horses save the crowbait team that hauled the Conestoga. Oscar had even tried to buy the saddle, but unfortunately he'd made his dicker with stage money which Comanche used in sleight-of-hand tricks before making a spiel. After the stage money incident, the law of Eldridge had taken to looking down its long nose at the two wanderers.

Then there'd been the restaurant where Comanche had bought their last meal the evening before. Comanche had proposed to pay double or nothing, depending upon the outcome of flipping a coin, and he'd used a double-headed four-bit piece for the feat. The restaurant man had been too quick of eye and the incident had closed with Comanche shelling out genuine money. But street talk had it that the sheriff was looking for both Comanche and Oscar for a little palaver at the very moment when they were hastily harnessing to put the town behind them.

No, Eldridge was better left where it was. But Comanche had no taste for this tableau before him now. Yet, though he had no stake here, he came off the wagon, a tall, eye-filling figure in a fringed, buckskin suit, his long silvery hair curling to his shoulders beneath his creamy som-

PRODUCED BY UNIFORC
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brero, his skimpy goatee stiff with anger. And a pearl-handled .45 was in his hand.

"Sir, you are an unmitigated scoundrel!" he charged.

The fellow swung around, dropping his torch and going for his gun in the same motion. Comanche fired then; the gun flew from the gaunt man's hand, and, at the same time, Oscar Lund came off the wagon, his bovine face twisted with rage. Crossing to the man in long strides, Oscar hit the fellow once with a maullike fist, and the gaunt man went down to a dreamless sleep. The woman, silent witness to all this, sighed her relief, and Comanche doffed his sombrero with a courtly air.

"He'll trouble you no more, ma'am," he said. "Oscar, truss him up and drag him into one of yonder buildings."

While Oscar was obeying, the woman said: "I'm Nancy Trawley, sir. I'm more than beholden to you. That man is Jug Garland, brother to Nate Garland who is foreman of Ab Karth's big K spread to the south of here. The K has threatened us many times. This morning Jug Garland came and gave me ten minutes to get whatever I wanted to tote away out of the shack. You saw what he was going to do. The same thing has happened to many others on this range."

"You're a widow, ma'am?"

"I wonder," she said and despair edged her voice. "My man, Jim Trawley, rode over to the K yesterday to try and talk Ab Karth into leaving us alone. You see, Karth gave us no trouble when we first came to file upon land that he had pre-empted years ago. But other homesteaders came and, lately, Karth's crew has grown belligerent. Jim thought he might change Karth's mind. But Jim never came home."

Here was a story as old as greed and grass; there was always the cattleman who laid claim to the land, and the sodbusters who came with homesteading papers—the challenge of the present to the past. There was always violence and bloodshed, but these were matters that didn't concern Doc Comanche, for he was a wanderer, a citizen of nowhere, owning not one square foot of earth.

Oscar had returned to stand at Comanche's elbow, and the pitchman, replacing his sombrero, said: "You have a horse in yonder corral, ma'am. Eldridge is not far to the east, and Jug Garland will stay tied until you fetch the law. An efficient man, the sheriff of Eldridge. Doubtless he will investigate the disappearance of your husband. I'd fetch the sheriff myself, but unfortunately our trail leads westward. Good day, ma'am."

There was no hope in Nancy Trawley's face. She shook her head wearily. "The sheriff will jail Garland, yes. He'll have to do that as a gesture. But he'll not go to the K in search of my Jim. He's a friend of Karth's, the sheriff is. But if you have to go west, you could veer a little south to the K. You could find out if Jim's dead or alive!"

Comanche stiffened. "I'm afraid, ma'am, that Jug Garland got a

PRODUCED BY GNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glimpse of me and my wagon before Oscar, here, put him to sleep. If the sheriff frees Garland and the man returns to the K, I'll be finding it a mighty unhealthy place."

"I'll keep Garland here," Nancy Trawley promised. "I won't send for the law until tomorrow morning. That will give you time to make a check-up at the K."

Doc Comanche clambered to the seat of the Conestoga. "I can make you no promise, ma'am," he said.

"Just follow the road you're on," the woman cried. "A few miles farther and it forks. You'll find a sign post. And . . . and God bless you, mister!"

Big Oscar beside him, Comanche clucked the team into motion and had a last look at the distraught woman and the child who clung to her mother's skirts, her big, round eyes fixed in awe upon him. Then he forced his gaze away, but the memory of those two was not as easily banished. As the Conestoga creaked along, Comanche spoke to big Oscar, telling him of Jim Trawley and Ab Karth and of the situation involving these people, telling him in simple, painstaking language, for Oscar Lund was not very quick on the savvy.

"We'll find out what become of Trawley, huh, Doc?" big Oscar decided.

Comanche frowned. "Back there we had no choice but to intercede. This is another matter. We must learn, sir, to keep our noses out of other people's business."

Oscar shrugged. "Reckon you know best, huh, Doc?"

All too soon they came to where the road forked, and here was one sign pointing west and saying: BUNCHGRASS—SIXTY MILES, and the other, pointing south, which read: K RANCH—KEEP OUT—THIS MEANS YOU!

"'This . . . means . . . you . . .'" big Oscar read laboriously. "How did they know *we* was comin', Doc?"

Again Comanche frowned, but now he fished a coin from his pocket. "This settles it, sir," he said. "Heads we tarry at the K an hour or so—tails we continue toward Bunchgrass." The coin flashed in the morning sunlight, was expertly caught and examined, and Comanche sighed. "Heads," he announced.

"Sure, Doc," said Oscar. "That's the four-bit piece that always comes up heads. Didn't you know that, huh, Doc?"

Turning the wagon onto the south road, Comanche found himself wondering why he was doing this thing, and because he could find no answer he shrugged away such reflections. The country was growing more broken, and soon the road dipped down into a wide, brushy coulee that snaked tortuously along. Around a turn they met the riders, a full dozen of them, grim and gun-hung, and the one, gaunt and beak-nosed, looked so much like Jug Garland that Comanche instantly knew him to be Nate Garland, the K foreman. Comanche sawed hard on the reins.

"I take it," said Garland, "that you can't read, stranger."

PRODUCED BY UNIVERSITY OF ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Doc Comanche wrapped dignity around him. "I, sir, am recently come from Eldridge where I bestowed the blessing of Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine on the populace. I saw saddlers from many spreads in the town, but none bearing the K brand. The mountain had not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet comes to the mountain. I, sir, am fetching the benefits of a superior cure-all to your spread. I had no idea your sign applied to a benefactor of humanity such as myself."

Nate Garland's close-set eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You're a doctor?"

"If you are asking, sir, whether I bear a medical degree, the answer is no. Such things indicate only stupid book learning. I, sir, am Doctor Comanche, adopted kinsman to that noble tribe whose name I bear, and possessor of all the lore of medicine men who were healing their people long before Columbus landed at Plymouth Rock. I, sir—"

"Never mind the spiel," Garland interjected. "If you're a doctor, there's a patient for you at the K. If you're a fraud, you'll be sorry you lied. Get those crowbaits moving—straight ahead."

Once again the Conestoga began its creaking, K riders flanking the sway-backed wagon on either side, and once again Doc Comanche fleetingly remembered Eldridge, and this time he was certain that he would have preferred the potential dangers of that town to the very genuine dangers of his present predicament. A doctor! He'd been taken for a doctor, and he'd made claims about himself that he couldn't possibly prove. A plague on a ready tongue and a quick imagination!

But there was no turning back on this troublesome trail, not with K guns to right and left, and thus Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund emerged from the coulee to find the K buildings before them—a pretentious two-story house, corrals, a mammoth barn and all the trimmings of a prosperous ranch. And here, with the wagon brought to a halt before the house, Comanche and Oscar were herded to the wide gallery fronting the place.

"Stay here," Nate Garland said to Oscar. "Boys, keep an eye on him. I'll take this old goat inside."

Into the house, Comanche was steered up a broad stairway and down a hall that gave off into a spacious bedroom. In the bed was a silver-maned man, leathery of face and broad of bone, his eyes tightly closed.

"This," said Nate Garland, "is Ab Karth, the K owner. He's been having these unconscious spells on and off for a week. Do a good job on him, mister. Because you're staying here till you get him on his feet."

Approaching the bed, Comanche tried very hard to adopt an air of confidence, but all the while his mind was racing, and his thoughts were far from inspiring. Stay here until he cured this man? And tomorrow Nancy Trawley would be having Jug Garland, that arson-minded K hand, taken to Eldridge. Eldridge's sheriff would free Jug Garland, and be-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

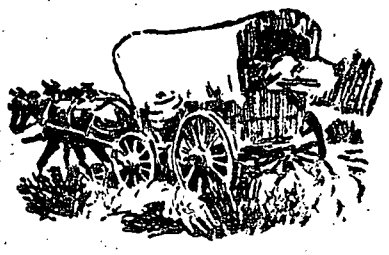
fore the day was done Jug would be back at the K. Jug Garland would take one look at Doc Comanche and the lid would blow off. A fine how-do-you-do this was going to be!

Taking Karth's pulse, Comanche judged that it was normal. The man's heart seemed to be strong and steady too, and Comanche seated himself by the bedside, stroked his goatee and fell to studying the patient. There was nothing in the face of Ab Karth to indicate that he was a man who used torch and gun against his weaker neighbors, the pitchman decided. Nate Garland restlessly paced the room for a while, then stepped out into the hall. Comanche heard the foreman's boots beat toward the stairway, and Ab Karth suddenly opened his eyes.

"I've got to trust you, stranger," Karth said evenly. "I've played sick, hoping they'd bring the sawbones out from town, but I see they didn't take that chance. Will you get a message to the sheriff at Eldridge for me?"

Comanche almost fell from the chair. "A message, sir?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"Yes. Tell the sheriff I've been kept prisoner on my own place for the last month or so. Tell him that Nate Garland has taken over with his own hand-picked crew; they aim to get me to sign the ranch over to them, and then they'll kill me. But they've got to keep me alive until they get my John Henry. They've posted no-trespassing signs and kept everyone off the place. The sheriff did come out one day, but they kept me out of sight and told him I was sick. That's what gave me the idea



of playing sick to get a doctor out here. Will you tell that to the sheriff?"

Comanche's nimble mind was whirling, but he was able to snatch at his scattered thoughts, and the pieces, so picked, fell into place. "Jim Trawley, the nester!" he ejaculated. "He came here yesterday. And I'll wager he found you a prisoner, sir!"

"Garland's crew was a little careless yesterday. Yes, Trawley rode up boldly and even got into the house. I liked Trawley; he was the first nester here, but I have no quarrel with his kind. I've more acreage than I'll ever use. But since Nate's taken over, he's made trouble for the nesters, aiming to have no outsiders on the ranch when he finally gets it. I told Trawley about that yesterday, but Nate caught him here. Naturally he couldn't let Trawley get away then; the man knew what was going on. Trawley's a prisoner out in the saddle shed. And Nate sent his brother, Jug Garland, to fire the Trawley place this morning. He wants to scare Missus Trawley out of the country before she comes snooping to see what happened to Jim."

This explained a lot of things—the

PRODUCED BY LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about-face attitude of the K which had at first tolerated nesters, then taken to persecuting them—the disappearance of Jim Trawley—the attempt to burn out the Trawleys. But now boots were beating in the hallway again, and suddenly Nate Garland was framed in the doorway.

"I'll swear I heard voices in here!" he rasped.

"A Comanche chant," said the pitchman. "I was intoning it, sir, to bring this poor man out of his coma."

Garland's face colored. "What sort of hocus-pocus is this? You've got a wagonload of medicine down below. I just looked it over." His gun came into his hand. "Fork over those fancy .45's, Doc. There's something fishy about you. There, that's better." He tucked Comanche's surrendered guns into his own belt. "Now let's see you do some genuine doctoring."

"This case, sir, requires special medicines," Comanche said. "The drug store in Eldridge may have them. Now if you'll provide me with a speedy horse . . ."

"No smoke, Doc. Write what you want on a piece of paper and I'll send one of my boys after it."

Doc sighed. "The druggist might not have the right ingredients. But they can be mixed from staples. I, sir, must go along."

Garlands's smile was skeptical. "That big assistant of yours can go along. You're staying here, Doc."

Whereupon Doc Comanche shrugged in surrender, scribbled a note which read: *Semper Fidelis*, 1 gram; *E Pluribus Unum*, 5 oz. "Latin," he explained to the mystified foreman.

Within fifteen minutes big Oscar Lund, provided with a horse, was heading back toward Eldridge, but with him went a K hand with instructions from Nate Garland to keep an eye on Oscar. When they had gone, Garland stood on the broad gallery, gazing restlessly toward the north.

"High time Jug was getting back," he said. "If he don't show up soon, I'll send a couple of you boys over to the Trawley place for a look-see."

Doc Comanche, climbing the stairs again, settled himself beside Karth's bed. It had taken Comanche all of last night and part of this morning to come from town to the K spread, but the Conestoga was not speedy and horsemen could cover the trail in half that time. Now it was noon, and that meant big Oscar and his guard would reach town by early evening. Midnight would see them back at the K, returning empty-handed, for a druggist would read no sense in that prescription. Nate Garland was already suspicious; his suspicion would be even greater then.

But the real core of Comanche's worry lay in the fact that Garland, getting fidgety over his brother's absence, might send someone to the Trawley place. The fat would be in the fire for sure if that happened! That was why Comanche knew he must get away from this ranch and quickly, and he formulated one futile scheme after another.

When he was sure Garland was

REPRODUCED BY UNIVERSITY
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prowling elsewhere, Comanche whispered the latest developments to Karth.

"I could pretend to get well," Karth suggested. "Nate would have no reason for keeping you then."

Doc shook his head. "He's got a hunch that you're shamming, sir, and that we've talked. He doesn't mean for me to leave here. But wait, sir!"

There was a closet in the room, and Comanche examined its contents. Here were Ab Karth's clothes, and also some extra bedding. "I, sir, have one ace-in-the-hole," Comanche explained. "It may work; more likely it won't. Meanwhile, get into these clothes and then get back into bed. I want you ready for a quick departure if I can arrange the means."

Karth obeyed, and while the man was dressing Comanche knotted extra sheets into a rope. Busy as they were, the two kept their ears constantly cocked for any sound that would indicate that Nate Garland was coming upstairs again. Karth dressed, and the makeshift rope prepared, Comanche was about to stow it under the bed. But at that very moment there came a roar from the floor below.

"Nate! Where in blazes are you?" a voice bellowed. "And where's the jigger that tooled that medicine show wagon that's outside. I want to get my hands on him!"

Ab Karth's face went white. "*Jug Garland!*" he whispered.

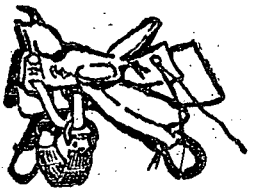
Jug Garland had escaped from the Trawley place and he had seen Comanche's wagon out in the yard! Now the fat was in the fire for sure, and Comanche had no time to arrange the means to escape. There was nothing left but to take chances—any kind of chances—and Comanche was across to the window in a bound, hoisting the sash and peering out. It was a long drop to the ground, such a long drop that Nate Garland hadn't thought it necessary to post guards at this side of the ranchhouse to keep Ab Karth inside. Instantly Comanche was knotting his makeshift rope around a bedpost, flinging the rope out the window.

"You first, sir!" he urged Karth. "Can't risk both our weights at the same time!"

Below, Jug Garland was still bellowing wildly, and, from somewhere in the house, Nate Garland was answering him. Ab Karth was over the sill and beginning a careful descent, but his progress seemed agonizingly slow to Comanche. Then Karth reached the ground. Boots were slogging up the stairs, but Comanche was through the window and nimbly lowering himself. Ten feet from the ground he heard a wild curse above him, and he let himself go then and dropped. Rounding the house, he and Karth went running toward the corrals.

No one barred their way. Not at first. Most of the crewmen were apparently still loitering on the gallery to the front of the house, but there were hitched saddlers at the corral. Before they reached these mounts, Karth veered to one side, fumbled with a stout turn button and shouted a name inside the saddle shed. In a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



moment Jim Trawley, a robust, red-faced man, came tumbling into view. There was no time for explanations, and Trawley needed none. The three were into saddles and jerking at tie ropes when men poured around the house and the guns began their banging.

But now the trio was wheeling horses, charging down upon the K crew, scattering them, and they came through unscathed to roar off into the north. Soon a coulee swallowed the fugitives. Luck had been with them so far, and they could only hope that it would hold; and Comanche realized they would need luck in plenty. They had fleet horses, but they were unarmed; and the whole strength of the K would be hot on their heels as soon as the crew could get into saddles.

"My place!" Jim Trewley bawled. "We'll want walls around us!"

Comanche agreed, but he wondered if there'd be any walls left standing when they reached the nester's home. Had Jug Garland finished his job of firing the place after escaping from Oscar Lund's ropes? Or had he been in such a hurry to reach the K that he hadn't tarried? There was no knowing. The trio reached the crossroads and rested their horses, but soon they were drumming onward, for the ground was trembling to the beat of K hoofs.

Trawley led the way, and Comanche, who'd come over this country only once, was glad to follow someone who knew the terrain better than he. Leaving the road, they short-cutted overland, and, onto flatter country, they saw the dust of pursuit behind them. The distance was too great for guns, but the K was sticking to the trail, and Doc sighed thankfully when he sighted the small bluff that had hidden the Trawley place until he was almost upon it this morning. Approaching it now from another angle, he saw that the buildings were still standing, and shortly the three were roaring into the yard and spilling from saddles.

Nancy Trawley and the little girl came running to greet them, and Jim Trawley folded his family into his arms, but only for a moment. The woman's eyes had warmed at sight of Doc, but they turned hard as she recognized Karth. Trawley noticed and said: "He's no enemy of ours, Nancy. It's the Garlands who were giving us trouble. And here they come. We're in for a siege!"

They got inside the shack, and Trawley instantly dug up a brace of .45's and a pair of rifles which he passed around. "Jug Garland slipped out of his ropes and got to a horse a couple hours ago," the nester woman said. "I took a shot at him, but I think I missed."

"Here's another chance for you," Trawley said grimly.

For now the K was upon them, but three fighting men were at the windows of the shack, and their first

PRODUCED BY GWZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

volley emptied a saddle or two and sent the rest of the K hands hunting cover. The bluff gave them some shelter, and they hunkered behind bushes and rocks as well, and, with the Garlands shouting orders, they spread in a thin semi-circle, but the defenders of the shack kept them at a distance.

Thus the situation dead-locked. The afternoon waned and the evening came crowding, and always there were men at the windows, and always there was Nancy Trawley to thrust a loaded gun into a man's hand when he emptied one. The little girl was ordered to crawl under the bed and warned to stay there; and so the slow hours dragged.

"They're waiting for dark," Ab Karth judged. "That'll give 'em a chance to Injun close enough to burn us out."

"There'll be a moon tonight, though," Trawley observed.

But first there was an ebon hour before the moon rose, and during that hour the guns banked incessantly from the shack, the defenders firing at every moving shadow. Then the moon came up, and the semi-circle of K men had grown tighter, and suddenly Ab Karth cried: "Look! Two riders coming this way from Eldridge."

Oscar Lund and his K escort had made better time than Doc Comanche had expected, and the wagon road had brought them to the Trawley spread first. But now K men were surrounding Oscar, dragging him from his saddle, roping his arms behind him. Karth groaned.

"They've got that man," he said. "And they've got one more gun on their side. They're getting ready to rush us, too. Nate Garland can't afford to leave any of us alive, and he'll have to take the long chance. Here they come!"

"But look, sir!" Comanche cried. "Riders from Eldridge! A dozen and more! Isn't that man in the lead wearing a sheriff's star? Come, sirs; we'll have the K in a crossfire!"

For suddenly the K hands had found themselves beset from behind, and Nate Garland, desperate, was bellowing an order that turned K guns against the oncoming townsmen. But Comanche and Karth and Jim Trawley were out of the shack and charging forward, putting the K between two fires. Gun thunder and curses made a raucous medley, and then men were hoisting their hands and throwing their guns aside, and the fracas was over.

Comanche was instantly to where big Oscar Lund had been dumped into the grass, and he fumbled at Oscar's bonds as the men of Eldridge lined up their prisoners. And thus it was that Doc found the law of Eldridge looking down its long nose at him and his assistant. "The big galoot stole a fancy saddle in Eldridge this afternoon," the sheriff said. "See, it's on the K horse he was riding."

"I left money for it, Doc," Oscar protested. "Sure, I took the saddle, but I left money for it!"

"Stage money!" the sheriff snorted.

Doc Comanche bowed toward Ab

PRODUCED BY LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Karth. "The ace-in-the-hole, sir, that I mentioned. I had a hunch that Oscar, returning to Eldridge, would be tempted by a saddle he coveted and that even the K gun guard who accompanied him would not be able to restrain him from taking it. I also presumed that the sheriff would give chase when the saddle was missed and that Oscar would thus, unwittingly, lead the sheriff to the K. Do you follow me, sir?"

"I'm away ahead of you, Doc," Karth said. "Sheriff, I'll pay for this saddle. It's a present from me to these medicine men who helped me out of a mighty tight spot. The Garlands are both dead, I see. We'll have a nice, neighborly range here, thanks to Doc Comanche."

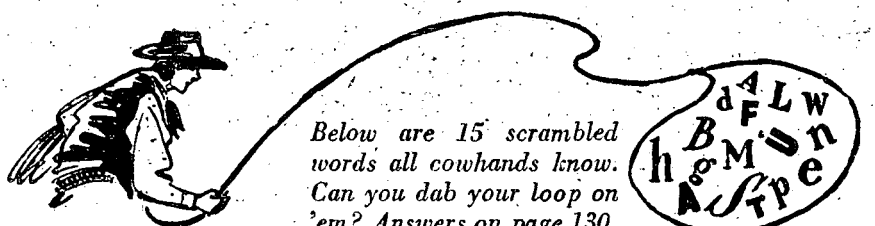
Doc bowed again. "We accept the saddle, sir," he said with dignity. "And now we must see about getting back to the K. We have possessions there—a wagon and a brace of .45's, if my guns aren't on Nate Garland. Will you be riding that way?"

And so another dawn found Doc Comanche and his assistant rumbling along the road to Bunchgrass, and there was happiness in the bovine face of big Oscar Lund, for the saddle he'd wanted rode in the wagon with them. What did it matter if Oscar had no horse upon which to place this handsome gear?

And Doc Comanche? The thanks of Karth and the Trawleys still echoed in his ears, and there was happiness in him, too, and he sought and found the reason for it. And he knew now why he'd interceded when Jug Garland had been about to burn the Trawley place, and he knew why he, Comanche, had fought afterwards to defend that place. He owned not a square foot of earth, this Doc Comanche; he belonged only to the beckoning trails. But just for a while it had been as though a hearth and home were his. Just for a while he'd had a calico-clad wife and a round-eyed, bare-legged daughter, and he'd fought for them, and for the roof over them.

It made a memory for a man to cherish . . .

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.

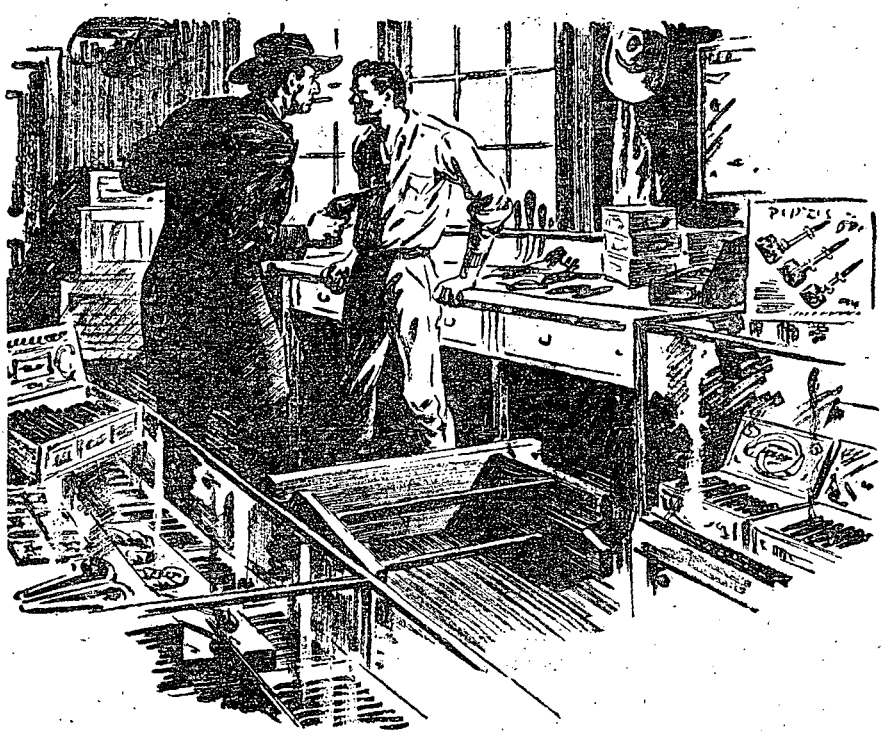
1. lek
2. gerran
3. tiba
4. waredrab
5. tidch
6. nowdkesha
7. chneb
8. vilan
9. dorf
10. plamisa
11. fibareck
12. klanf
13. drebe
14. talldashe
15. ermulete

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With the whole town blaming him for a wave of lawlessness and terror, could Clyde Merrill fight back against an enemy whose weapons were

DEVIL'S SMOKE AND SIX GUNS

by WILLIAM J. GLYNN



CLYDE MERRILL dropped his half-circle tobacco blade and leaped to his feet, sending his bench stool clattering to the shop floor. Anger stormed into his square, clean-cut face.

"I won't do it, Dedrick. You're a yellow snake—trying a thing like that. Why, it ain't human!"

Big Alf Dedrick stamped across the narrow little buck-eye cigar fac-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tory, his long coat snapping with his bull-footed stride. Twin six-guns in crossed belts slanted beneath his big paunch, slapped his long legs as he came to a halt at the far side of the room and spun back toward Clyde.

"You'll put that marihuana in with your filler, or by damn you're a dead man, Merrill!" Dedrick's voice was a rough growl, a throaty animal sound. His green eyes were like ice over a mountain meadow, glaring at the young cigar maker. "At a dollar a throw for them cigars we'll make us a pot of money. An' since when did a brother of that tinhorn, Ace Merrill, get so stiff-neck? Tell me that? Yeah, an' who put up the dinero to start this tobacco shop?"

Dedrick laughed harshly as he added: "You're forgettin' things, Merrill, an' I don't like it, savvy?"

Clyde's lips drew tight over teeth that lay white in the ruddiness of his complexion. His eyes narrowed, hot brown cracks in his grim face. Straight, wide-shouldered, he was a good head short of meeting Dedrick's six foot two or three. But what he lacked in height was more than balanced by the close-knit body, the easy way he had of handling himself that spoke of perfect coordination.

Clyde's gaze shifted from Dedrick's ugly features to the front window, to the snow-covered peaks and pine-clad slopes of the Sangre de Cristos rimming the little Colorado mining town. A big Arapahoe buck, happy-drunk, weaved past, wheeled and came back to stare with bleary eyes at the red-painted, wooden Iroquois standing in front of the shop. Two night-shifters from John Logan's Broken Lantern silver mine high on Black Mountain, clattered by in a new, stick-seat runabout, laughing and shouting, calling out ribald jibes to a cowpuncher staggering drunkenly up the boardwalk.

"Sure," Clyde said, his words popping in the silence of the shop, "you put up the money for my start. But that don't give you the right to tell me what to do. You'll get your money, Dedrick, just as soon as I can make it. And I'm not putting anything but good filler in my cigars, get it? Marihuana will kill a man, give him the string halt and a through ticket to boothill, an' you know it, you greedy hog!"

Dedrick rested his big-boned hands on his six-guns. "Stogie-roller, you get heeled when you talk like that to me. I got enough of that there dream smoke up to the Silver Dollar to put us both in the big money, understand? All you gotta do is put a big pinch of marihuana in each cigar. Dope it with perique for taste, if you want. Ask Ace; that slick jasper can tell you how. Them miners go for it like shoats to swill. I'll give you thirty cents for each cigar you turn out, an' if anybody squawks, tell 'em to see me."

Clyde could feel his temper boiling. "You go to the devil," he said curtly. "In two days there's been over half a dozen men killed in this hell camp, cut up like they'd been fighting a bear. That's how your marihuana works. I won't have nothin' to do with it. Not any!"

A crooked smile pulled Dedrick's

REPRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beak nose down over his thick lips.

"You oughta know all about it, Merrill. Them was *your* brand of cigars set them crazy cousin-jacks to fightin'."

"Mine?" Clyde's eyes shot to the long, sharp tobacco knife in the tool slot on his bench.

"That's what Cedar City thinks, Merrill." Dedrick flicked out his right-hand six-gun, pointed the long, blue barrel at Clyde's broad chest. "Shore," Alf went on, his voice smoothing to an oily purr. "You didn't make 'em, kid. Ace made 'em, 'cause I told him to. But up to the saloon, we ain't got the equipment fer big production."

"Then you were the skunk who stole that case of Pennsylvania broadleaf—"

Dedrick's tone went savage. "You get up to the Silver Dollar an' collect that marihuana an' start to work, you damn hot-head. If you ain't got a pile of 'em made up and delivered to me by dark this here cannon will be lookin' fer you!"

Dedrick eased to the door, swung up street and out of sight.

Clyde kicked his stool into a corner. Three o'clock now," he muttered. "Three hours—to hell!"

But it wasn't his way to quit in the face of opposition. He walked the length of the shop, stopped in front of his glass display case. There were pipes there, meerschaum, briar, corncob; Lone Jack smoking, Spearhead and Star plug; rows of neatly boxed nickel cigars and six-for-a-dime stogies.

"An' I ain't losin' this to no crook!" Clyde muttered. "Not even if Ace gets the short straw!" A hurt look crept into his eyes with thought of his older brother.

Flashy, genial, a good mixer and lover of the bright lights, Ace Merrill had felt tied down working in the little buck-eye shop. When Dedrick had offered him a job as a house gambler at the Silver Dollar, he'd jumped at it.

At the casing table, Clyde pushed aside the neat pile of stemmed tobacco, a cheaper domestic kind. He brushed the scrap and powdered leaf and dust from his oak cutting board. From under a damp cloth he pulled out pale, shade-grown Georgia wrapper, leaf tobacco that ran three dollars a pound delivered by freighter in Cedar City. The best that his money could buy, it made up well into a high-class two-bit cigar. Next, Clyde broke out two hands of Puerto Rican filler and a bunch of Chippewa broadleaf binder.

His long, deft fingers flew over the cutting board, sized the binder and spotted his filler, trimming to shape with his half-circle blade. Rolling up the binder, he cased with the wrapper, finished off with a dip from the pot of gum tragacanth.

He worked on, the temper cooling in his eyes. Pride in his workmanship and the smooth feel of the leaf under his palms erased the stubborn lift to his jaw. An idea took shape as he trimmed the ends of the cigars and packed the twenty-five in a cedar box. He laid down his razor-sharp tobacco knife.

John Logan, banker and mine owner, had ordered these specials.

PRODUCED BY LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Clyde would see him, deliver the box in person. Maybe, with Logan's help, he could get to the mine foremen, tell them what Alf Dedrick was trying to do.

Logan was a cold, self-sufficient kind of man; but if he realized the danger threatening his mine crew, and the ultimate loss to himself through lack of labor and a mine shut-down, he might take action against Alf Dedrick. Clyde thought it was worth a try, at least, and gathered up his cigars and the little four-barreled Sharps derringer he kept in his bench drawer.

He shoved the derringer into a back pocket of his Levis and left the shop. Two men, a heavy-set, slash-mouthed gent and a lean, gun-hung man in puncher clothing, stared at him from the shadow of the wooden awning over the dance hall across the street.

Clyde flashed a glance their way as he turned off his street at a cross lane and headed toward the main thoroughfare. He saw them get off their hunkers and follow. He didn't remember ever seeing them before, but he knew their type. Gunmen. And gunnies in Cedar City meant Alf Dedrick's hired killers!

On the main street, Clyde angled down to the bank and entered. He stepped to the railed enclosure near the door and leaned over the swing gate.

"Here they are, Mr. Logan. A box of *El Lirios*, like you ordered the first of the week."

John Logan was a slender man, dressed in cutaway, wing collar and black tie. His face was dark, somber, and there was no trace of smile wrinkles at the corners of his thin-lipped knife-cut of a mouth. His gray eyes were cold, brittle as they swept over Clyde's hundred and fifty pounds of bone and muscle.

"I don't want them, Merrill," he said gruffly. "And I'm busy. Unless you've got business with the bank—get out."

The hot blood that was never far from the surface, boiled up in Clyde's cheeks. "These are your special brand, Logan," he said in a level voice. "Thought you might like 'em for over the week-end. But if you don't want 'em I can easy sell to the hotel. Forgettin' the cigars, I wanted to see you about somethin' else—about the doped smokes Alf Dedrick's been handin' around. I—"

Logan rested white hands on the gate, stared unblinking into Clyde's red face.

"No, I don't want any of your cigars, Merrill. Not after what I've seen take place in this town for the past two days, and don't try to blame it on Dedrick. One of my mine gun guards says your tobacco is doped, got something in it that makes a man go crazy. Reckon you and that cheap tinhorn brother of yours are two of a kind, after all." Logan turned half around, shuffled the papers on his desk. "I'm busy," he added in quiet dismissal.

Anger blazed in Clyde's eyes.

"*You're busy!*" Clyde said that much and clamped his jaws tight. He was like an overheated boiler pushing the escape valve. Suddenly he reached out, grabbed the banker

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by his white shirt front, pulled him close to the gate.

"Why, you—you— Get out of this bank," Logan spluttered. "I'll have you locked up. I'll—"

"Listen, you dried-up old fossil," Clyde grated. "Nobody in this hell camp is goin' to tell me what to do. I'm doin' an honest job, runnin' a clean shop, see? As clean as this here grab-all bank of yours. I didn't put out any doped cigars, an' I won't ever. I asked you for a loan once, to start my factory. You turned me down cold. Now I ask real civil for help, tell you who's back of this devil's smoke floatin' in Cedar City an' you as much as call me a liar. You start talkin' sense, pronto!"

Logan squirmed, his bony fingers clutching at Clyde's hard-muscled arms.

Clyde shook him, shook him until the banker's collar flew open and his face went white, and then slammed him down in the chair in front of the roll-top cutler desk.

"Speak up, you—" Clyde began and stopped.

Something hard and cold pressed into his sweaty shirt.

"Turn around slow," a voice said in his ear.

Clyde spun around, stared flame-eyed at Marshal Ed Lunceford standing there spraddle-legged, a big .45 Colt in his hand. A deep silence blanketed the bank lobby.

"Alf told me you'd bear watchin'," Lunceford snarled. "By Jehoshaphat, he was tellin' the truth. You ear up fast, you ringy cuss. I ain't havin' no more trouble than I got in this hinge of Hades. I'm givin' you three to get out of here," the marshal added, cocking the six-gun, "an' then I'm foggin' this cutter. You movin'?"

Clyde tucked his box of cigars under his arm. "Yeah, I'm movin'," he said. "I'm goin' out an' do your job for you, you double-crossing, paid-off tin star!"

"Git!" Lunceford roared.

Out on the walk, Clyde's heels rapped hollowly. His eyes were black slits in the last rays of the sun spiking down into the jagged teeth of the Sangre de Cristos. The barber shop was full as he passed. Punchers from down on the Pueblo cow range, miners, townsmen, all sprucing up for Saturday night—for the fun and wild hilarity of the open town. He saw the miners from the Broken Lantern coming down the grizzled face of Black Mountain. Their weekly wages would be burning their pockets. Clyde didn't like to think what might happen if Dedrick made good his promise and flooded the town with doped cigars.

Clyde was heading for the drug store a block down street when a miner ran out of the pool hall to grab his arm.

"Say, you got any of them there seegars that gives a feller a quick drunk?" the miner panted. "I seen Alf Dedrick yesterday an' he said I could get 'em from you."

Clyde shook himself free from the grimy-faced hard-rocker. The man had already been smoking the stuff. He had a wild, crazed expression in his eyes and the strange, uncertain walk of a horse crossing quicksand.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The miner crowded close. "What's a matter, feller? I'll pay a couple of bucks each fer some of them smokes." He held out a fist of silver dollars. "Fork 'em over, or I'll take 'em away from you." The man's hand dipped toward the Colt jammed in the waistband of his trousers.

Like a firecracker, Clyde exploded into swift motion. His right fist came up in a short, shoulder-driving jab to the miner's jaw. The man tottered, his eyes rolling, out on his feet. Clyde eased him down to the walk, left his box of cigars beside him.

"Sorry," Clyde said. "But you ain't hurt none, an' when you come out of that, mebbe you'll go home an' forget the devil smoke."

Inside the drug store, Clyde rattled the counter bell and Gil Stainsby came slouching out to the tobacco case in the front of the long, narrow room. The druggist pushed his glasses back on his bald head, peering at Clyde from faded blue eyes set deep in his bony skull.

"What you in here for, Merrill? I'm loaded on cigars. Looka that case." Stainsby's usual smile was absent.

Clyde stared into the glass front of the tobacco counter. "I didn't sell those to you."

"Your bud, Ace, did. Him an' Alf Dedrick come in here a while back, about four o'clock. But I didn't buy any, got caught yesterday on them dang things, so Dedrick put 'em in the case. Said he'd leave 'em here on consignment, the dang crook. An' say, Merrill, I never thought you'd try pullin' a low-down trick like makin' them doped-up smokes."

Clyde felt the salty bite of anger on his tongue. "Go easy on that kind of talk, Stainsby. I didn't make 'em!"

"Yeah, well what I smoked yesterday shore was doped, an' it was a Merrill cigar. Ace couldn't've made 'em. He's workin' for Alf. Why, Martha—that's my wife—she said I was losin' my mind, or been hittin' the bottle. She said I come in last night higher 'n Ben Franklin's kite, an' crazy mean. No, I don't want no more of them dang cigars—an' you get out o' here before I get mad!"

Rage trembled in Clyde's finger pointing to the showcase. "In there—are those the boxes Dedrick left?" He reached into his pocket, peeled off a dollar bill and threw it at Stainsby.

The druggist removed his glasses. "Buyin' your own cigars?"

"No. That's for the glass I'm goin' to break," Clyde growled.

"Here, you dang fool. Wait!"

But Clyde wasn't waiting for anything. He drove his foot through the front of the cigar counter, smashed the glass into a thousand tinkling pieces and swept the boxes of cigars out onto the floor. He jumped on them then, stamped them into a shredded mess of tobacco and cedar boxes.

"Now put some of that in your pipe an' smoke it, Stainsby!" he shouted, and headed toward Dedrick's saloon.

The Silver Dollar was a spider's web, to Clyde's way of thinking, a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gaudy, square-fronted hive of Hades. One whole side of its big, high-ceilinged room was devoted to games of chance; faro, poker, chuck-a-luck, keno, paddle-wheel and dice tables. Alf caught everyone who had money to spend. And if the Silver Dollar was too steep for a man's roll, there were always Dedrick's cheap dives down in Redding's Alley on the edge of town.

Clyde stepped up to the long, mahogany bar. Gleaming cut glass chandeliers flashed kaleidoscopic colors from the sun, spotting its last red glow in through the mullioned mezzanine windows over the line of private dining rooms. Three bartenders in white coats waited on trade, their plastered hair and pink faces shining in the reflected light from the huge bar mirror.

"What will it be?" the head barkeep asked.

"Alf Dedrick. Where's he at?" demanded Clyde.

"You're Merrill, the cigar maker? Let me compliment you on those fancy cigars you've been turning out. They go like buffalo hump in a tribe of starving Indians. You don't happen to have—"

"I said, where's Dedrick," Clyde cut in.

The barman stepped back, his face suddenly stony. His round eyes darted past Clyde, toward the other side of the room, and then came back. "In the back room, his private office. He said he had something there for you."

Clyde whirled away, turned and stalked swiftly toward Dedrick's office. He noted that Ace's paddle-board was locked and covered. But the faro layout was in full play with the lookout, Wichita Bob Newton, watching the game and the gathering Saturday crowd from his high-legged chair. Clyde could feel Wichita's pale eyes crawl his way and swarm over him, probing for a gun, but his derringer made hardly a bulge in his back pocket. Reaching Dedrick's door, Clyde saw that Wichita still sat in his chair.

Putting one hand on the doorknob and the other in his pocket to grip his .32, he leaped inside.

"Jest close that door, Merrill—slip the bolt. An' don't lift thet peashooter you got swingin' by your side."

Clyde glared at the man seated at the deal table in the center of the little office. "Where's Dedrick?"

A deep scar on the man's face pulled his ugly mouth into a sneer. He was one of the two who had trailed him when he left his shop, Clyde remembered.

"He ain't here," the gunny said calmly. "He didn't aim to be here, but that's all right 'cause I can do what's to be done without no help from Alf. He said he told you to come here and pick up the marihuana. You didn't do it. Why?"

Clyde's lips were a taut band over his teeth.

The gunman went on. "So now you're out, savvy? Alf took over your store, him an' that tinhorn stogie-rollin' brother of yours. Now jest how do you want to take your lead, standin' or sittin'?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who are you?" Clyde said, fighting for time.

"Blacky Jackson," the gunman replied, "an' when you get to hell you tell ol' *Diablo* to bank his fires. I ain't comin'."

"That's what you think," Clyde barked. He heard boots pounding in the saloon and suddenly became a flash of lightning movement. Ducking to one side, he caught the table and, in a big heave, turned it over, sending Jackson slamming back into the rear wall. The gunman's six-gun roared, smashed lead and flame a foot over Clyde's head to splinter into the door.

Clyde's derringer cracked, lanced its bullet into Blacky's right arm. Jackson got to his feet cursing, his six-gun dropping from lax fingers. Then he was at Merrill, his big left fist swinging up in a round-house to sizzle past the cigar maker's weaving head. Clyde stepped inside the wide swing, sank his left jab into the big man's thick middle.

Jackson's wind gushed out and he bent over gasping.

"Stand up, you big gorilla. I ain't finished with you yet."

Blacky moved fast for a big man. And he wasn't out. Dropping to one knee, he clawed for his six-gun. But he didn't make it. Merrill's gun cracked again, barked three times to stitch lead into Jackson's chest and throat. The big man jerked up like a green bronc on his first rope, blood spewing from his open mouth. Surprise twisted his lips into a horrible grimace, but the wires were down. He fell against the overturned table and rolled to the floor.

Scooping up Jackson's six-gun, Clyde dropped his empty derringer and turned to the door. They were hammering on it out there in the saloon. It rattled on its hinges. In another second it would give and let in Dedrick's hired killers. Clyde leaped to the rear window and shoved up the sash. With one leg over the sill, he snapped three quick shots at the door.

He hit the alley running, raced through the litter of cans and trash, and wheeled into a vacant lot down past the opera house. Behind he heard men shouting and the coughing roar of a six-shooter.

Clyde darted across the main street and ducked into the livery. He ran past the startled hostler and emerged on the next street, his street. What he saw there brought him back into the shadow of the awning in front of a little eating house.

A crude, cloth sign had been tacked over the front of his cigar factory. In big red letters, it said: "Dedrick's Cigars." Beneath the sign a dozen or more miners milled around. Two or three of them were out in the center of the street fighting.

Clyde moved toward the shop, pulling his gait down to a walk, hugging the shadows. He wedged through the men near the door and stepped inside, his .45 swinging up in front of his slab stomach.

Alf Dedrick was there, behind the showcase, passing out cigars to a burly miner. There was a pile of silver dollars in front of him, and to his left stood the marshal and another man, the tall gunny who had

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

followed Clyde, with Jackson, earlier in the day. Ace sat at the bench rolling cigars.

"All right, all of you—reach!" Clyde's six-gun leveled on Dedrick, swung to cover the others. "You—cousin-jack, get out." Clyde backed around so that his back was to the side wall. He motioned toward the door with his gun and the miner scooted out of the shop.

"Thought I had you put away for keeps!" Dedrick bellowed. But he put his hands up, as did the others.

"You dang hammer-head," the marshal snarled, edging around the end of the showcase so that he faced Clyde, "you can't get away with it. By damn, I'll run you out of this town!"

"Shut up!" Clyde said. "An' stand still, or I'll run you—to hell. Ace, start talkin'. You throwin' in with these sidewinders? 'Cause if you are, you're gettin' the same medicine I'm dishin' out to them. An' it starts the first move you jaspers make for a gun!"

Ace Merrill's smooth-shaven cheeks were white. He stood up in front of the desk. He had his coat off and a big .45 rode his left armpit in a shoulder holster. "Kid," he said, "you're makin' a fool play. Put down that gun an' talk sense. Alf'll let you off, let you clear out of town. He said you wouldn't dope your stock. That's why he took over. You don't stand to lose more than your five-six cases of tobacco. There's a stage leavin' at seven. Grab it, kid. Right, Alf?"

A wild hot ferment bubbled and boiled over in Clyde's eyes. "Dedrick, you're a liar! You said it was make them doped cigars or you'd kill me."

Rage whipped into Dedrick's bony face and his thick lips snapped into a long curved line in his mottled cheeks. He was not a coward. Slowly his hands lowered and his eyes swept to his two gunmen. He ignored Ace Merrill.

"You *were* lyin', Alf," Ace said. "You told me you'd let the kid off if I made those cigars for you!"

A mirthless grin spread Clyde's taut lips. "I figgered it about like that, Ace, an' that clears you. Now *you* get out of here an' be on that stage at seven. The fight's mine from here on out."

"Out on a shutter, you fool kid!" Ace laughed. His tone carried the reckless nature of him; none of Clyde's temper. But the long, slim gambler's fingers were fast and certain, lashing down to his gun. And when the gun came out it was roaring thunder at the long-geared gunny sneaking a hand toward the twin Colts on his hips.

The .45 in Clyde's hand flamed, spiked lead at Dedrick. And then it clicked empty and Alf Dedrick's crashing six-guns strummed out their song. Clyde spun with the force of the lead, tripped and fell backward over a case of tobacco. The bullets in his shoulder and thigh were like red-hot awls and brought a vast weakness to his stocky frame. He rolled over to the bench, grasped the edge and pulled himself erect.

Ace's .45 crashed again and again, a sustained thunder of fire that

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rocked the walls of the little shop. Lead whined, smashed into wood, sent the miners out on the walk scattering like chickens under a swooping hawk's shadow. The lanky gunman in the puncher hat and boots, fell and quit shooting. His eyes stared vacantly up at the ceiling.

The marshal was down on one knee, his shirt front bloody, shooting at Ace.

Clyde heard the soft thud of lead striking flesh and turned to see Ace slump down over the bench and then roll to the floor.

Dedrick was still on his feet. He turned his cold little eyes from Clyde to stare at his right arm, hanging bloody and limp by his side.

Ace's gun was there on the bench, inches from Clyde's hand. Clyde grabbed it, flicked it level and snapped the hammer to send the marshal toppling over against Alf Dedrick.

The big saloon-keeper cursed, tried to gain his footing, stumbled and sat down heavily, a foolish expression of surprise on his face.

The pound of boots outside grew loud in Clyde's ears. Suddenly Wichita was there, crouched in the doorway. "Alf," he shouted, pointing at Clyde. "That buzzard—he jest killed Blacky down to the saloon!" Wichita's hand stabbed down to his six-gun and the swivel holster came level to flame powder smoke.

But he was late by a fraction, for Clyde already had Ace's .45 cocked and sent a bullet singing into the lookout's chest. The man dropped without a sound, and Clyde turned to Dedrick. But the gun was empty.

"You ain't no gunman," Dedrick chortled, and swayed toward the cigar maker.

Clyde dropped the gun, watched in terrible fascination as Dedrick closed in. If the big saloonman got those long arms around him he'd break him in half, tear him apart. Or he'd lift that left-hand six-gun and blast out his life. The hot temper left Clyde's eyes then. He knew a moment of fear, until his right hand, supporting him against the bench, closed over a little pile of dust and scrap tobacco. He threw it straight at Alf's cold eyes.

A wild cry of pain burst from Dedrick's mouth. He dropped his six-gun to claw at his burning eyes.

Clyde launched himself at Dedrick, scooping up the falling gun. His left leg wouldn't support him. He fell against Dedrick and the two of them toppled to the floor. Dedrick's eyes were closed, streaming from the bite of the tobacco, but his long arms wound about Clyde, squeezed the air from the cigar maker's lungs.

Still clutching the six-gun, Clyde thumbed the hammer, let it snap on a roar.

A great deep blackness claimed Merrill after that, and he didn't come to until he felt himself being lifted from the still form of the saloonman.

Later, stretched out on his work bench, Clyde felt a sharp pain in his shoulder and opened his eyes. Doc Johnston put down his probe. "Reckon you owe me a cigar, son, for all

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the lead I just pulled out of your ringy hide."

Clyde grinned up at the doctor and at John Logan bending over him.

"I misjudged you, boy," Logan admitted, with one of his rare smiles. "Got to thinking things over after you left my bank and went up to see my mine foreman. He put me straight on this deal, said he'd heard Dedrick boasting about how much money he was going to make selling doped cigars. Well, I got my mine guards and came down here, but I guess we were a bit late. You'd just about finished your Cedar City cleanup."

"Ace," Clyde whispered. "He's not—"

"He won't shuffle no more cards, son," the doctor told him. "Left wing'll be stiff."

"Not too stiff to sell *El Lirios*," Clyde said, smiling, "or to toss that pile of marihuana in with Dedrick when you cover him up on boothill."

"You're a fire-eatin' son, Clyde Merrill," Logan said, and pinned the marshal's bead-pointed badge on Clyde's shirt.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

M. Howard Lane

a native of a part of the West which is rich in colorful lore, Santa Barbara, California, is the son of a pioneer who came over the Oregon Trail in the early '60s. The captain of the same wagon train, one of the largest ever to cross the Plains to California, was Howard's grandfather. And this young writer is carrying on family traditions by writing spirited adventure stories of the times when hardy pioneers carved an empire from a wilderness. The many tales of days gone by told him by his family, and the uncanny ability to ferret out a story from anyone he meets, started Lane writing Western fiction. He cottons to meeting all kinds of people; says it helps him in creating convincing characters. "Just talking to folks," he claims, "is one of my keenest hobbies."

"The rustling of the leaves" has it that he's a crack pistol shot (our draw has slowed some with the years, so we won't call for a showdown!) and for a milder pursuit he breeds and trains chowchows at his home in the Santa Ynez Mountains. Gets a real thrill being "cookie" at his barbecue pit when a T-bone steak is around (who wouldn't) but claims red points these days are as scarce as T-bones. With which we heartily agree . . .

JUDGE JIM MEETS A LADY, Lane's latest yarn, appears in our December issue and will take you back to the roaring boom town days when San Francisco was young and Sutter's Fort seemed like the goal of all the world!

Also in December—Walt Coburn, Tom W. Blackburn, Frank Richardson Pierce, S. Omar Barker, Nelson William Baker and many others.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

PROSPECTING may follow new trends in the future. There will be continued search for the primary metals certainly. But modern developments in mechanical gadgets—the airplane for instance—have been utilizing more and more of the lighter metals such as aluminum and magnesium. Prospecting with these light-metal trends in mind is likely to color the metal hunter's future explorations, whether in the still rich mining areas of territorial United States, in Alaska, or to whatever wilderness country his restless feet may carry him.

Doing some forecasting of his own along these lines, Reader G. Y., of Hamilton, Ohio, has requested information on aluminum ores. "I know," he wrote in, "nothing can ever dim the romance of gold mining. But right now I am thinking of something else—aluminum. It seems to be a coming metal in the future. Can you give me a line on aluminum ores?"

In the past bauxite, a close to 40% aluminum ore, has been relied on to produce the bulk of our, and the world's, aluminum. Bauxite deposits have been mined in this country in Arkansas, Alabama and Georgia. To fill increasing needs, the aluminum industry has relied on additional large-scale imports of bauxite from foreign sources.

Bauxite is a very soft, light, earthy mineral often resembling clay. It may be white, yellow, brown or red. Perhaps its most striking characteristic is the "eyes," peculiar red or brown spots almost always associated with bauxite. The "eyes," ranging from a fraction of an inch to more than an inch in diameter, readily distinguish bauxite from common clay.

There are other simple preliminary field tests for this important aluminum ore. Good commercial grade bauxite crumbles or powders when a small amount of the material is rubbed in the palm of the hand or between the fingers. Ordinary clay becomes plastic—moldable—under such treatment. Try rubbing some of the suspected bauxite on a piece of glass. Bauxite won't scratch glass, but clay will. Then there's the tooth test. Bite into a piece of bauxite. You'll find it won't grit the teeth.

Once a mineral has been identified as bauxite through field tests, a later chemical analysis is necessary to determine how rich it is before its com-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mercial value can be estimated. Silica, the chief impurity in bauxite, is a heavy drawback to the value of the ore. In a good grade of bauxite the silica content should be less than 8%.

Bauxite usually occurs as a surface deposit, formed by the weathering of clay under certain favorable conditions. Clay, therefore, is the most important and most common mineral associated with bauxite deposits. But there are many more clay deposits without any sign of bauxite than there are clay deposits with the highly important aluminum ore.

To be of real value, a bauxite deposit should be extensive and so situated that large tonnages of the raw ore can be mined from it at low cost. For instance, according to figures of the U.S. Bureau of Mines in 1939 before the war the average selling price of bauxite, f.o.b. the mines, was $4.35 per long ton for crude bauxite and $5.36 for crushed dried bauxite.

Chronic pessimists, the Jeremiahs who sit back in an office chair and like to claim the country's done for as far as new or latent mineral resources are concerned, have worried a lot about aluminum. Bauxite deposits in the United States, they point out, are few and far between. And we have been working them out at an increasing rate.

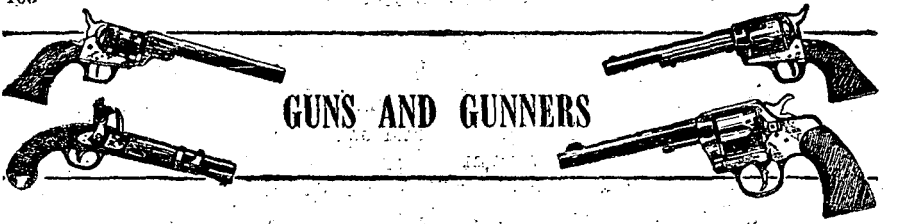
This is true. But it doesn't positively preclude the possibility of discovering a new and hitherto unsuspected bauxite area in the future. Finding minerals where they are, regardless of where they are not supposed to be, is an old habit with prospectors. It has occurred time and again in the case of gold and silver and other metals in the United States. It could happen in the case of bauxite..

Anyhow there is another side to the aluminum picture. Aluminum is the third most abundant element in the earth's crust. There are fairly common rock-making minerals containing perhaps 10% or 15% of aluminum. Some of these, such as alunite and high alumina-content clays, occur in deposits containing millions of tons of the aluminum-bearing material in many parts of the West, notably in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California, Montana and Utah.

The problem of extracting the aluminum from these potential future sources has been solved in the laboratory. Polishing the methods up for large-scale adaptation is, we understand, already being undertaken. Once this has been successfully accomplished it may lift a whole new series of minerals to the status of ores that can provide the foundation of a vast domestic aluminum industry centered in the western States. The technological difficulties involved are far from insurmountable.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

SOMEWHERE IN GERMANY—I can't help but wonder what will happen to the German firearms industry. Will the art of the German gunsmith die?

Under the system of occupation, every German must turn in all weapons in his possession, sporting as well as military equipment. I've seen countless thousands of guns taken over and destroyed, among them some wonderful old and new Schuetzen rifles.

Schuetzen shooting is, and always has been, a German sport. Fortunately many of these examples of the German gunmaker's art will not be lost, because GI's by the thousands are cornering them and sending them home as war trophies. I've picked out a few beauties—Martini and other types of actions, heavy barrels, and beautifully carved fancy stocks. It seems a shame to let those go to waste, and the boys are picking out some fine ones to send home. After this war is completely finished, there will probably be more German rifles in America than at any time in our history.

There is one sad angle—you can't send ammunition home for these weapons. Most of the Germans seem to have had plenty, but they had to turn it in. Most of those rifles take cartridges never available in the United States, so unless they are rebuilt, they will be useless. Yet some of them can be modified by rechambering them and using American ammunition.

One of the most beautiful jobs I have ever seen had a Martini action, was completely engraved with German hunting scenes as only the German engraver can do them, typical relief engraving, and had a beautiful fancy walnut stock, also carved with hunting scenes. The man who showed it to me wanted to know what ammunition it took, and we found that it handled the 8x72—an 8 mm. (.31 caliber) with a long tapered case 72 mm. long—almost 3 inches. He suggested that after the war he might be able to get some German ammunition from a well-known importer in New York. I hated to tell him that that importer gets his supplies from Germany and Germany is not going to make any ammunition for a very long time. Perhaps he can have it rebarrelled for some American cartridge, or have the barrel relined.

However I found me a couple of beautiful Schuetzens for the .22 long rifle, and those will get a workout

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just as soon as I can get back to the good old U.S.A.

Back in April, before the fall of Germany, U. S. troops of the Ninth U. S. Army captured the big German Proving Ground at Hillerslaben. I was up there. An enormous place, with ranges for about everything—one artillery range was about 26 miles long with a straight concrete road running along the side and a concrete observation post every 1,000 meters. I was down on that range. Deer were everywhere. One afternoon I counted 31.

In Germany, hunting is very good but not for the simple citizen. Only the very wealthy landowner can do it—or could. The game is all on private estates, and there is no public hunting grounds. The sentences for poaching, a German prisoner told me, are unbelievably severe and drastic.

With all of those deer running around loose, I got hungry for venison. I spotted three of them in the open on the range, and walked up on them, in plain sight, until I got about 50 yards away. Then they decided not to fraternize and departed. One didn't. A lucky shot in the neck with my .45 pistol anchored him. I turned him over to a mess sergeant, and we had venison for dinner that evening.

I can add that German venison tastes just about as good as the American variety.

Another very tasty dish is wild boar. One of the boys ran into one at Hillerslaben. The boar tackled him and he had to shoot in self-defense. I'd also like to try a bit of bird shooting while I am here. Plenty of them to be had, and I always did get a lot of enjoyment out of that sport.

Germany won't make guns for a very long time, and all German guns will fall into Allied hands. Hope that some of her wild game is eaten by U. S. troops—Germany won't be able to hunt it, unless she returns to the bow-and-arrow game — which has never appealed to the sportsmen of this country.

I hate to see good sporting rifles destroyed. Hope that the GIs manage to get the best of them home. They have worked for them. It looks as though there will be a plentiful supply of guns in the U. S. A. after the war, and although some will remain as trophies, others will be shot on many a target range and used in American forests to take legitimate game. You can mail these home, but you can't send in pistols, revolvers, machine guns, or sub-machine guns. They have no sporting value, anyway.

I've seen enough military weapons to last a lifetime. It's a pleasure to handle some of these fine sporting weapons again. Only I want to shoot them in the United States.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. Although he will still answer letters from readers, we ask your indulgence, as the war emergency will naturally cause some delay. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

A BACKPACKING expedition into the country that only the man afoot can reach affords one of the most adventurous types of camping trip. Especially where marked trails provide the route.

Hiking is healthy exercise, and good fun. The hiker can go his own gait, set his own pace and stop where he wants. He camps where fancy chooses, for he carries with him everything he needs.

With Reader R. T., hiking is a habit. Writing from Glendale, California, he says he's done considerable backpacking in western Oregon. He used to live there, outside of Portland. Now in his new surroundings he wants to stretch his legs on a long backpacking trip in southern California. "Two hundred miles at least," his letter reads. "And into country that's different—like the desert."

R. T., how about a 406-mile backpacking trip from Tehachapi Pass south to the Mexican border? The route's a honey. It crosses 70 miles of desert to the Coast Range Mountains and wends along their ridges for 200 miles or more. Then before the trail reaches Mexico, its southern terminus, it dips into the desert again.

On part of the great 2,000-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail System, water and camping sites have been established at designated intervals. Even across the desert portions good water can be found about every 15 miles. The route, known as the Desert Crest Trail, is open to hikers from June to December.

Backpacking the Desert Crest Trail is a fascinating way to learn the desert at firsthand and cruise the towering mountain ranges of southern California. Hiking the whole route takes an estimated 32 days. It is not necessary to cover the entire 406 miles in a single trip. Trunk-line highways cross the trail at intervals throughout its length offering access to or exits from the trail where bus or other transportation can be had.

For instance, from the Los Angeles district a start can be made at Tehachapi Pass, the real beginning of the Desert Crest Trail, or the trail can be picked up at Soledad Pass from Highway 6, or even further south at Cajon Pass.

Starting from Tehachapi Pass adventure comes with the hiker's first step into the desert wilderness. For 30 miles there are no trail markers. Compass direction is the only guide

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across the open sand. It's true desert wilderness travel. From a point on the roadway 3 miles east of Tehachapi the backpacker turns south by compass and keeps on until he comes to Oak Creek Spring, 10 miles distant. That's the first night's camping spot.

The second jump is another compass hike, south 12 miles to Willow Springs where water and a place to camp can be found. Third jump, or third day on the usual itinerary is a short 6 miles still south to water and a place to camp. Stepping off 17 miles the fourth day is lengthier going. But the trail brings you past Elizabeth Lake, up from the desert floor and into the Angeles National Forest for the evening meal and a good night's rest.

From then on, the rest of the division to Soledad Canyon, in fact most of the rest of the trail clear down to Mexico, can be followed pretty generally by route markers rather than by compass. But it's a good idea to keep the compass handy.

The second division of the Desert Crest Trail is the stretch between Soledad Canyon and Cosy Dell in Cajon Canyon. The route traverses the Angeles National Forest, the Devil's Canyon wild area and part of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Carrying along extra water is advised for the first two days of this portion of the trail; that is, for the 12-mile hike from Soledad Canyon to the summit of Mt. Gleason, and from the summit to Sulphur Spring, 15 miles. Five days are usually allotted for covering the 87 miles between Soledad Canyon and Cosy Dell.

The next division of the trail runs through the San Bernardino National Forest and the San Bernardino Mountains to Strawberry Valley. Most of the 117 miles covered is high above the desert floor. Some of it offers breath-taking vistas of the country far below. The route skirts the forested rim of such celebrated southern California mountain resorts as Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear Lake and finally brings the hiker, via the high summit slopes of Mt. San Jacinto, to Strawberry Valley.

One more division, part trail-marked, part across open country, and part of it temporarily routed alongside regular roadways, will bring the backpacker the final 129 miles to the Mexican border and journey's end. The hike from Strawberry Valley to Mexico can be comfortably made in eleven days.

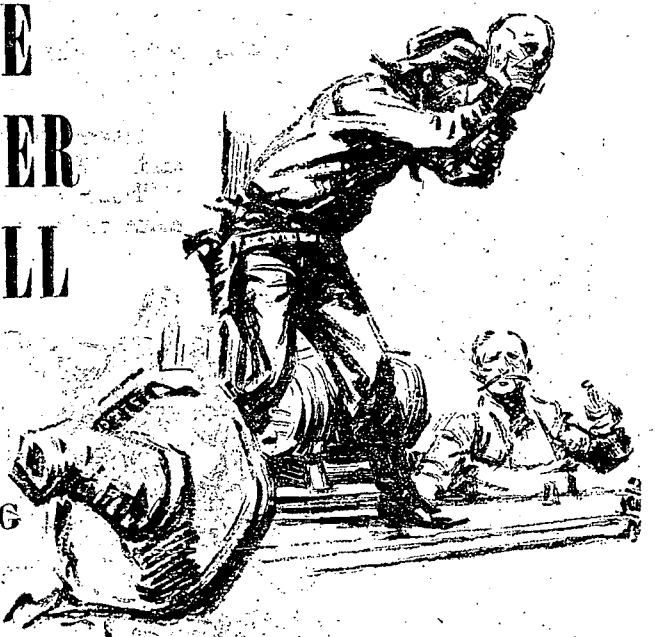
It's a swell trip, camping as you go, carrying your needings with you. But remember as part of the Pacific Crest Trail System, the Desert Crest Trail from Tehachapi Pass to the Mexican border is a true wilderness route. Long distance hikes on it are geared to the backpacker with experience as well as enthusiasm.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It didn't cost Bill Callahan much to redeem that macabre cranium but he'd have to pay a hot-lead toll if he wanted to discover the secret it held

THE SILVER SKULL



by HAPSBURG LIEBE

I

GRIZZLED old Sheriff Bill Dornbush walked out of his office just as Vince Callahan came down the steps of the bank next door. The attention of both men was upon a crowd that had gathered around the little railroad station beyond the dusty town square. No train was due, and Callahan's curiosity was aroused.

"What's up, Bill?" he asked.

"Ole hoss sale," answered Dornbush. "Y'know, that's what they call it when they auction off freight that's not been claimed; only way the railroad's got of collectin' their charges. Some o' the stuff is boxes without labels, sort o' mystery stuff. Want to buy yourself some luck?"

The sheriff laughed. Callahan didn't. He said:

"I could use a little luck, Bill. You heard o' me inheritin' five thousand and puttin' it down as first payment on a big cow outfit, which is now the V-in-C. Well, my range creek is dryin' up, with beef prices below zero, and the bank won't lend me a cent. Besides, I've had some rustlin', and my bunkhouse burnt, and my best hoss busted a leg and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had to be shot, not to mention that I went on a friend's note and had to pay it, then had to thrash the said friend. Windmill wells would save me, but—"

He broke off, shrugged, continued: "I never believed much in luck, Bill, but now I'm wonderin'—"

"There's such a thing as luck, all right," Dornbush said. "Ask any gambler. When the cards run bad for 'em, do they keep playin'? They quit. Look at that jigger standin' over there at the edge of the station. Ever see him before?"

The man indicated was tall and bony, slit-eyed, pale as a ghost, dressed in rusty black except for a white shirt flecked with mildew.

"Never saw him before," Callahan said. "Who is he?"

"Nobody seems to know. His name on the hotel register is Gran-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ville Orr. Dropped in here last night. Looks sick, but ain't. Couple hours ago one o' our town bullies tried to push him offa the sidewalk —and he picked the bully up and throwed him clean into the middle of a vacant lot! This is one reason why I'm goin' over there, Vince, just to watch Granville Orr."

The stranger barely nodded when the officer spoke to him in passing. Dornbush and Callahan were soon following the crowd around to a side door of the sun-blasted station building. The agent opened the door and showed his pile of scarred and dusty old freight which ran in size from a small keg up to a set of heavy wagon wheels. The agent began his spiel glibly:

"Looks like a good many folks saw my advertisement. Well, gents, we have here first thing a box with a pretty dog-eared red tag on it. Can't make out what's written on the tag and the bill we had for the box has somehow been lost. What's—"

"Fifty cents!" offered an enterprising storekeeper.

"What's in the box," the agent went on, unperturbed, "goodness only knows."

"One dollar," said Granville Orr.

He spoke in a deep bass voice that Vince Callahan thought was a little too casual.

"And a half," said Callahan.

The tall young cowman looked straight at Orr and he noted a flash of anger in the narrowed eyes of the stranger.

"Three dollars!" said Orr.

Callahan had been on edge for weeks. That, no doubt, was why he read bold challenge so plainly in Orr's deep bass voice.

"Ten dollars!" he promptly shot at the agent.

"Twenty!" There was undisguised, cold rage in Orr's voice.

"Vince, you lost your mind?" muttered Bill Dornbush. "Likely it ain't anything but some long-gone miner's old clothes."

"Forty-five dollars!" said Callahan. It was all he had.

The crowd held its breath. The agent grinned. "Fifty? Fifty, do I hear? Do I hear fifty? Gents, you're not goin' to let this magniferous prize go for a measly forty-five dollars, I know. Forty-five once, forty-five twice—you over there, stranger, how about it?"

Orr was emptying out pockets, his scowl almost ghastly. He didn't have fifty dollars, or forty. He glared murderously at Callahan, then walked off toward the liveryman's.

"Sure had better be some luck in this," said Callahan picking up the box. With Dornbush he turned across the square.

In the sheriff's office they set about opening the box. Extra nails had been hammered in and it was a little difficult to pry off the top. While he plied a clawhammer, Callahan was talking:

"Somethin' plenty odd about this, Bill. The Orr jigger was sure determined to have it, wasn't he? In my figurin', that's exactly what he was doin' in this man's town. If there's anything very valuable in the box, why was it let lie in the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

depot only to be sold the way it was?"

"And how could a man as strong as Orr be so pale?" muttered the officer.

"Possible he's been in some prison and just got out," said Callahan. "Look, Bill—old clothes, like you thought!"

The job finished, he threw the hammer down. From the box he drew a rumpled and musty coat, a pair of trousers in equally poor condition, a torn candy-striped silken shirt. Then he lifted out a bizarre and beautiful triumph of the silversmith's art—an almost full-size silver skull.

"Say, that's been a tobacco jar—what they call a humidor, I'll bet," said Bill Dornbush. "That flat knob there on top; the top screws off. Hurry and see what's inside, Vince."

Behind them the alleyway door creaked open. They turned to see Granville Orr with a double-action .41 leveled in his right hand.

"I'll take the skull," he said. "Don't make me kill you both."

"He'll do it, Vince," Dornbush said hastily. "Give him the damned thing."

Callahan wasn't slow in the use of weapons, and he had a good one on his thigh. But he wasn't altogether a fool. He gave the gleaming jar to the pale stranger, who spoke again:

"Unbuckle your gun belts and drop 'em."

They did.

"Now kick 'em over here to me—hustle!"

They did that, too. Still with his six-shooter a deadly threat, Orr wedged the silver jar inside his mildew-flecked white shirt, bent to pick up both gun belts with his left hand, rose and stepped swiftly backward into the alley.

"Stay froze," he warned the two men, "or I'll blast you down!"

His saddled horse waited close by, a star-faced bay. In almost no time at all, Orr had forked the animal and was riding a streak. Dornbush snatched a Winchester rifle from its wall brackets and ran to the back door.

"No use," said Callahan disgustedly. "He's already turned the corner. Got a gun and belt you can lend me, Bill?"

Dornbush hurried to his desk and pulled a drawer open. The young cowman grabbed out a six-shooter and belt that were mates to his own, and ran to the street. A few seconds later he was in the saddle and riding hard after the pale stranger.

II

The hoof prints of Granville Orr's bay led out a little-traveled street that, at the edge of town, turned obliquely into the south. The sparsely grassed terrain made it easy to follow the trail. Callahan rode at full gallop, but his sorrel cow horse was not as fast as Orr's mount, and the race was already lost.

But not even when the trail had faded completely in rocky badlands that were strange to him, would Callahan quit. After the sun had gone down, he came to a full-flowing creek that he hadn't known existed. His

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

big ranch, scarcely a day's ride away, had almost no water—and here was this fine stream in a land that possessed no other value as cattle range! Some geological fault, of course.

His mind jerked back to his task by the stumbling ring of an iron-shod hoof on stone some little distance up the creek. Orr was not riding fast now. He had used up a good deal of time in circling, hoping to throw off pursuit. Callahan grinned at his luck and reached for his borrowed six-shooter.

Dusk was gathering when he sighted the dim figure on the creek bank ahead. Orr saw him, too, and started shooting. Callahan returned the fire promptly. The pale-faced man again took refuge in wild flight but not until his third bullet had the cowman reeling from his saddle.

It was the throbbing of Vince Callahan's temple that brought him to. He had the impression that he'd been unconscious for only a minute or so. Then he saw the high moon, and knew he'd been out for some hours. His horse stood over grounded rein near by.

"The jigger was a good shot," he muttered, sitting up. "He—"

"Who done it, cowboy?" cut in a strange voice.

Vince reached toward his holster. No weapon was there now. He staggered to his feet, turned and saw the man who had just spoken. Not tall but thickly built, he wore a low-slung, long-barreled Colt gun. Beyond him stood a big calico horse under a double-cinched saddle.

"Jigger name of Granville Orr," Callahan answered testily, "if it's any o' your business."

"It's my business plenty," retorted the newcomer. "Orr rode in with a bullet gash high in his neck, too bad off to sabby much. He didn't have—what he went after. I rode down the creek to see what I could see, and found you. Now do a little talkin', cowboy!"

Briefly Callahan told the squat giant what there was to tell. "So Orr rode in without the skull. Where?"

"To where we happen to be stayin'. My name's Ben Radebaugh. What'd you say yours is?"

"Vince Callahan. You took my gun?"

"I got it in my shirt," Radebaugh answered. "I caught your hoss there. Fork it, and we'll ride aways. I'm not quite satisfied with things as they lay, Callahan. For one thing, I don't want you goin' back to that sheriff with what you know—or think you know."

"I see," replied the cowman. "The skull disappeared, and that's what's eatin' you. Well, what was to prevent Orr from hidin' it somewhere, thinkin' to go back after it some day and have it and whatever's in it all to himself?"

"I'd hate to think Gran Orr would do that," Ben Radebaugh said stiffly. "I'd foller him to the end o' the world and kill him, if he did. Look, cowboy—you forkin' your hoss to ride with me, or am I takin' you belly-down across your saddle?"

His right hand was on the butt of his long-barreled gun. With a shrug, Callahan got on his sorrel horse and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rode up the creek bank with Ben Radebaugh.

They followed the stream into rocky hills, and rode for two hours.

"I reckon you figure the skull belongs to you," Radebaugh remarked.

"Well, I bid the box in at a legal sale and paid good money for it," Callahan said. "Don't know why I paid so much. I'd had a run o' tough luck, and might be I sort o' had a hunch . . . but I reckon you're not interested in tough-luck tales."

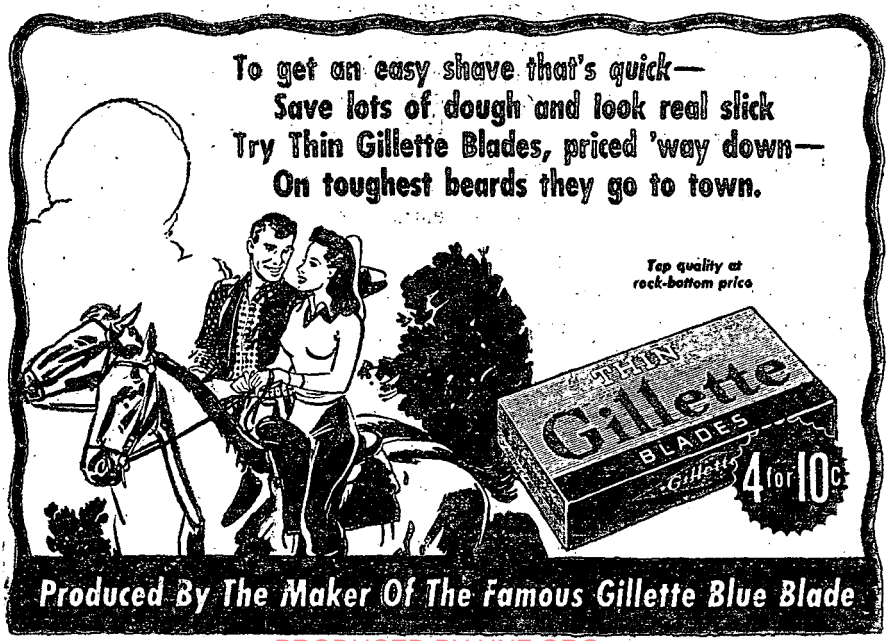
"Only my own," said Radebaugh.

They kept riding. The moon grew old, and, as its light began to wane, Callahan could see dimly that they were entering a level, cliff-walled basin, grassed only along the edges of the creek.

The two men rode around a nest of boulders, and the cowman saw ahead a much weathered, low-roofed log house. It came to him that he had heard of the place. There'd been a gold strike here in the old days.

They turned their horses into an old corral with Granville Orr's star-faced bay, and went inside. The thick-set giant wiped a match into flame and lighted a pair of tallow dips on a wall shelf near the door. Callahan saw his companion's stubbly bearded face plainly for the first time, and he was not surprised to note that it was almost as pale as Orr's.

Stepping briskly across the floor and to a spread blanket, Ben Radebaugh caught Orr by a shoulder and pulled him to a sitting posture. The tall, black-clad man blinked in the yellow glow of the candles, and with



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one hand began fumbling with the bandage around his neck.

"Feel better now, eh, Gran?" Radebaugh said. "Remember things now; eh? Remember this Callahan cowboy?"

Orr kept blinking. His face seemed paler than ever. His lips moved stiffly: "Why . . . yeah. Must've been him that . . . shot me. Did you get it, Ben?"

"I did not. Callahan didn't have it. One o' your bullets nearly got him, too, Gran. Look, pardner—you wouldn't be snake enough to try to beat me, would you?"

Icy suspicion was in his voice. The eyes of Granville Orr slitted, steadied, showed a sudden keen alertness.

"Don't be loco, Ben," Orr said. "The cowboy's slug knocked me blind: There'd be minutes when I didn't know anything at all. It's a mystery to me, why I didn't fall off my horse. I've got no more idea what I done with the skull than you have!"

"No?" Ben Radebaugh's eyes were narrow. "I'll tell you what you done with it, Gran. You hid it somewhere. The cowboy was to be the goat. Lucky I found him and brought him in with me!"

"You think I was fakin' the shape I was in when I got here?" demanded Orr.

"Could've been, easy," Radebaugh said. "Listen, Gran. One o' two things will happen before ten o'clock tomorrow—either you find the skull, or I plant a bullet smack between your peepers. We cain't stay here too long. That sheriff might jump us with a posse."

There was hardly a chance, Vince decided, that Bill Dornbush would locate this hide-out so soon. He found himself wondering what Orr had done with his and Dornbush's six-shooters. He noted that the man in black was watching him closely.

"Ben," Orr said after a few minutes' scrutiny, "you better keep that cowboy there in mind. Strikes me he's smart."

"Not so smart," said the cowman, wearily. "Not so smart, but powerful curious. That silver skull tobacco-jar contraption sure has got me goin'. What's in it? I've already guessed that you two hombres have been in prison; your pale faces give you away. It's not so hard to figure that you shipped the jar to get it out o' your hands, and was delayed in claimin' it."

"Shut up!" Radebaugh barked angrily.

It was the reaction that Vince Callahan had both hoped for and expected. He was sure now that his figuring wasn't far wrong.

Orr lay back on his blanket with his right hand close to his six-shooter. The big squat man kicked another blanket into a heap under the shelf and candles, and sat down in the shadow with his long-barreled weapon ready in his lap.

Callahan stretched on the floor dog-tired and, in spite of himself, went to sleep.

There was another man in the old house who went to sleep in spite of himself—Ben Radebaugh. Daylight

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

woke him, and his storming woke Callahan. Radebaugh rushed over to a back window and looked out toward the old corral. No star-faced bay horse was there now.

"Gran Orr is gone!" Radebaugh thundered. He jerked his gaze to Callahan. "Up from there, cowboy. We'll trail him plumb into the bottom kittles of hell—or would you rather stay here?"

His big gun was half drawn. Vince knew what he meant. The cowman got to his feet and went over to peer through the window.

"Orr was locoed," Callahan said, "leavin' our two hosses that way; would've run 'em off, if he'd had any sense. Sure, Ben, I'll go with you."

III

In little time the two were in saddles and riding the trail of Granville Orr back down the creek. There was scarcely a moment when Radebaugh didn't have a careful eye on Callahan. Weaponless, the cowman could do nothing save wait and watch. His head clear now, he did some thinking. Ben Radebaugh hadn't wanted him along simply to keep him from going to the sheriff; Ben meant to use him.

Radebaugh, also, had done some thinking. "One thing here don't make sense, Callahan," he growled. "If it had been in Gran Orr to run with the loot, why did he even ride in this direction when he left town?"

That hadn't made sense to Vince Callahan, either.

"Maybe you was talkin' too fast when you told Orr you'd kill him if he didn't find the skull by ten o'clock today. He's a bad hombre, Ben, but he's afraid of you," he said.

The hoof prints of the star-faced bay shortened, then became jumbled where the brief creek bank gun battle had taken place the evening before. There were footprints, too, Granville Orr's. The pair of trailers began riding a wide circle around the entire scene, and soon cut the bay's running tracks leaving the creek, making straight south through the badlands.

"Light a shuck, cowboy," called Radebaugh. "He's got it, and he's also got a fast hoss and a head start!"

"And maybe," Callahan told himself, "he's foolin' us." Then to his burly companion, "Orr knew you'd be after him. Might be he's only runnin' from that long-barreled gun on your hip. By the way, what happened to my six-shooter which you had inside your shirt last night?"

"Throwed it away," Radebaugh said curtly. "I've noticed, cowboy, you're a heap int'rested in my long-barreled Colt. Lookin' for a chance to grab it, I suppose. Now why you reckon I've been particular to keep you ridin' on my left an' never on the side my gun is on?"

The bay's trail led into a sheer wasteland of sand and pear, which stretched southward. Afternoon came, and with it a breeze that shifted powdery sand over the hoof prints of the bay, wiping them out completely. But Radebaugh insisted that they keep riding into the south.

More time passed. Then Ben Radebaugh made a mistake. He didn't notice when Vince, after hav-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing lagged a rod or so while pretending to be searching for hoof prints, rode up to him on the right.

The next instant Radebaugh faced the muzzle of his own six-shooter and the cowman was telling him:

"You'll have to go the rest o' the way by yourself, Ben. Me, I got other plans. Keep goin'. If you stop or turn, I'll start shootin'."

Their eyes had locked above the leveled steel barrel. "Stick with me," Radebaugh said, "and there'll be twenty thousand dollars in that silver skull for you instead of for Gran Orr. I mean that, cowboy!"

Twenty thousand dollars. Enough to get the V-in-C out of debt and put in the saving windmill wells besides. Luck? Callahan came back to reality with a jolt. If there was money inside the silver tobacco humidor, it couldn't be anything but stolen money.

"Ben, I told you to keep ridin', didn't I?" he said coldly.

Radebaugh hooted. "And you hell-bent on catchin' up with the skull!"

Half an hour later when Radebaugh was out of sight Callahan turned his sorrel horse and rode for the creek at a point miles east of the hills. He still believed that Granville Orr's dash into the desert was a trick caculated to throw off pursuit.

Dusk had gathered when he came to the creek, so he didn't waste time looking for the trail of the star-faced bay. For four hours he rode down the bank of the stream. Moonlight had shown him that he was riding in cattle country again.

He turned a long bend lined with tall chaparral, and saw ahead of him an uneven string of lights marking a short, rugged main street.

"Buckskin Glory," Callahan muttered wearily. "I didn't think I was that far from home."

Nor had it occurred to him that the creek he had been following was the creek that ran through Buckskin Glory.

Both cow and mining town, this was, and the wildest, toughest town in that end of the State. The lights were mostly in saloons. One of these had a hotel attached to it; another was a combination of saloon, dance hall and gambling emporium. Midnight had struck but there were still crowds under the big garish hanging oil lamps.

Callahan left his horse at a hitch rail and visited all the lighted places. His eyes missed little or nothing. He found men whom he knew—one of them the town marshal—and asked questions discreetly. Finally he was driven to the conclusion that no tall, pale stranger in rusty black was in Buckskin Glory.

He borrowed a few dollars from the town's lone lawman and had something to eat, then took his sorrel to the livery stable. The night man was an affable Mexican. Yes, the señor could sleep in a haymow if he so wished; yes, he would sneak word to the señor if a strange bay horse with a star in its face showed up here later in the night.

Callahan climbed a perpendicular ladder into the haymow, waded over to a big gable opening, and there flung himself down and slept like a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

boulder until the sun was more than an hour high. Waking, he turned over, stretched, sat up. The long-barreled Radebaugh gun in his holster reminded him of his quest.

The stableman's adobe house was in the rear. He had half a dozen children, the eldest a boy of about ten, and they were playing in the sand under the pepper trees and *retamas*. Looking down upon them from the gable opening, Vince saw what they were playing with and gasped.

It was the silver skull!

At that same moment the children's buxom mother came to her back door. She, too, saw the gleaming, grinning skull.

"Pedro!" she cried superstition shaking her voice. "*Santa Madre!* Where did you get that accursed thing? Put it out of your hands, Pedro!"

Vince stiffened. Where, indeed, *had* the boy got it?

"Just a minute, señora," he called down. "The accursed thing happens to be mine. I'll be there pronto."

He hurried down the perpendicular ladder—and came face to face with a murderous little two-barreled derringer in the big fist of Ben Radebaugh!

Nobody else was in sight there on the ground floor of the livery stable. Instantly the cowman put his hands up to shoulder level. The squat giant grinned maliciously.

"I always carry a little fella like this in my boot, cowboy, just for luck. No good at any distance, but up close it's a whizzer. I'll take my six-shooter now, cowboy. You stay froze tight like you are!"

Vince forced a grin, "So Orr made a monkey out o' you, after all," he said.

"You seen him?" rapped Ben Radebaugh. "I just found my way into town. If—"

He had stepped closer and was reaching toward the cowman's holster for his big six-shooter. With his anger once more aroused against Granville Orr he was less cautious. Here was Callahan's chance. His left hand, moving almost with the speed of lightning, struck the derringer aside and his right hand snaked the six-shooter from leather.

"Drop it, Ben!" ordered Callahan, the long barrel against Radebaugh's stomach.

Radebaugh dropped the derringer, swearing, and began to back-step slowly toward his spotted horse, which stood over trailing rein in the wide street doorway of the stable. Callahan let him go. Right now Callahan wanted to hurry to the skull; it might vanish again!

Mornings in Buckskin Glory were nearly always quiet. The sudden flurry of hoof beats that was heard now on the rocky main street rang with startling loneness.

"Ben!" a deep bass voice said. "What the devil—where's your gun?"

Granville Orr had seen the big calico horse, then had seen Radebaugh and his empty holster. With the Radebaugh weapon still workwise, Callahan walked out of the stable shadows. The tall, pale man in rusty black was too wise to make

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a move toward shooting hardware now.

"If it ain't the smart cowboy," said Orr, reining in near the calico. "Ben, looks like we'll have to split the thing three ways instead of two. Skull, skull who's got the skull? Where the hell is it, anyhow?"

"Like you didn't know!" snarled Radebaugh.

"I sure don't know! I'm tellin' you the truth, Ben," Orr declared, and truth was in his sober voice. "You was goin' to drill me; remember? I took you at your word an' rode back down the creek from the old house that night, lookin' for the thing. But I couldn't find it. A little after daylight I hit into the desert to get away from you, and lost myself, but finally located the creek again—and here I am."

"You tryin' to tell me you hid the skull so well that you couldn't find it?" Radebaugh threw back.

Orr shrugged. He glanced meaningly at Callahan. The cowman guessed that Orr had something to tell and was going to tell it only to Radebaugh.

"We'll pass that up for the present," said the man on the bay. "My hoss had to be fed or drop in its tracks, Ben, and I'm half starved myself," he continued. "That's why I stopped here. I—"

"Who's the jigger comin' down the street watchin' us, cowboy?" Radebaugh broke in sharply.

The cowman cut his eye hard to the left. The jigger was the Buckskin Glory town marshal, Jim Pickett, a man almost as tall and rawboned as Granville Orr. Pickett took his job seriously and Vince felt a sense of relief when he saw him.

"Howdy, Jim," he called. "Here's a pair of hombres that you'll do well to lock up while you're sendin' to the county seat for Sheriff Bill Dornbush. The one on the bay there has a fast gun, and he's a dead shot. Watch him!"

"I take it you know what you're talkin' about, Vince," Pickett said, unfastening his six-shooter. "Both pale enough to be jailbirds, ain't they? Off the hoss there, you in the black suit, and no monkey business!"

Orr stepped out of his saddle and let the reins fall. The Buckskin Glory lawman disarmed him, made sure he wasn't carrying a hideout weapon. The whiskered old liveryman had appeared on the other side of the street. Pickett called to him, ordering the two lank-bellied horses fed. Then, with Callahan's aid, the town marshal led Radebaugh and Orr to a small, stout log calaboose and locked them in. Both prisoners began yelling for grub.

"You'll get it," Pickett said, turning away with the cowman. "Now, Vince, you can tell me things, and I'll send for Bill Dornbush if I think I ought to—hey, where you goin' so fast?"

"Back in a few minutes," Callahan threw over a shoulder, "right now I got a job that I'm afraid to put off any longer!"

IV

Hurrying on down the street, he turned a corner of the livery stable and soon was rapping at the front

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

door of the night stableman's adobe house. There was no response. He ran to the back, saw no one.

Hastily he searched inside the place but he did not find the silver tobacco jar.

The old liveryman heard swift foot falls and turned. It was Callahan and he was talking fast:

"The Mexican family that lives back o' the stable here—know where they went?"

"The Oliveros? How would I know where they went?" drawled the liveryman. "This happens to be fiesta, and they've gotta lotta kinfolks over in San Sebastian, few miles south o' here; might be they've went over there. Anything wrong, pardner?"

"A heap," said Vince, and sprang to the task of saddling his horse.

It wasn't fiesta that had headed the Señora Oliveros and her brood out of Buckskin Glory so fast. Superstitious to a high degree, the woman had seen in the grinning skull of silver the evil of black magic and was running from it. Her husband, the night stableman, each morning picked up a peso or so as swamper in the big combination saloon, dance hall and gambling spot. The señora had stopped in her flight only long enough to tell him, and had taken him with her.

Callahan knew the road down to San Sebastian. He had galloped over less than a mile of it when there was a shout from behind him. Half turning in his saddle, he saw Jim Pickett coming after him, his horse also at a run.

"Yelled at you as you rode out o' town, Vince, but you didn't pay no attention to me," Pickett complained. "I want to know positive right now—what's up?"

"Tell you as we ride," Callahan said. "Come on!"

He told Pickett of his hard luck with the big new V-in-C ranch; of his buying the skull at the sale of unclaimed freight—everything, though with little detail.

"Bad hombres, all right," Pickett agreed. "But a heap of it don't stack up, Vince. Why did Orr start back to Radebaugh with the skull, if he meant to steal it? You reckon Orr took out whatever was in the thing and throwed it away, and the Oliveros *muchacho* found it? If so, why did he wait till he got so close to Buckskin? Also, how come Sheriff Bill Dornbush hadn't had some news about this pair, them bein' so bad and on the loose?"

"Likely Dornbush hadn't had time to get the news, Jim," said Callahan. "Sure, a lot of it don't stack up. If Orr took out what was in the skull, he certainly wouldn't have throwed it where it could be found so easy. He had only a little money on him and not much else, as you'll remember, when you searched him for a hideout gun. Jim, Granville Orr didn't bring that skull to Buckskin Glory!"

"Then who did?"

Vince shrugged. "It's a cinch that Radebaugh didn't either. I don't hope to profit by this, though I sure could use money. I've kept goin' with it mostly because I just hated to be licked."

"Reckon I'd be like you," the mar-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shal said. "Well, Vince, you go ahead to Sebastian and see what you can learn from the Oliveros outfit, and I'll ride back to Buckskin and feed the jailbirds. Also, I'll hightail a man after Bill Dornbush. *Adios!*"

He waved a hand and wheeled his horse.

Callahan had been expecting to overtake the Mexican family. He didn't. On foot as they undoubtedly were, he reasoned now that they had taken a short cut across country. After waiting in San Sebastian for two hours without catching a glimpse of the Oliveros he swung into his saddle again and put his horse into a lope northward.

As he turned into Buckskin Glory's main street he noted a group of men gathered around the front of Jim Pickett's office. Among them was the bewhiskered old liveryman, who spoke as Callahan rode up:

"It was them two pale fellas, pardner. They jumped the town marshal when he brang 'em grub to the calaboose, tuck his gun and whanged him on the head with it. Then they scooted to the stable and stuck me up for their hosses and my old six-shooter and hightailed. So they've each got a gun. The vet'inary is in there workin' with Pickett now."

Callahan sprang off his sorrel, flung the reins down and ran inside. Jim Pickett, sitting in his desk chair, had just come back to consciousness.

"That sure is a tough pair, Vince," he said wryly. "Quick? Lightnin' is a slowpoke. Maybe it was lucky I'd got a rider off to the county seat for the sheriff before I went to the *calabozo*."

"Then Bill Dornbush oughta be here soon after dark," Callahan said. "I didn't find any o' the Oliveros tribe, Jim."

The old liveryman spoke from the doorway. "They're gone, all right. But if Ric Oliveros ain't at the stable tonight it'll be the fust night he's missed in ten years."

"Somethin' else puzzles me, Vince," muttered the deputy. "Why didn't Orr take the loot out o' that skull and throw the thing away, at the start? Would've been easier to carry, wouldn't it?"

Vince frowned. "I thought o' that too, Jim. When Orr stuck Dornbush and me up in Dornbush's office that first day, I was tryin' to unscrew the top o' the jar, and couldn't budge it, though I've got a right good grip. Likely the screw threads was corroded tight. Maybe Orr couldn't budge it either. Also, maybe Orr was afraid Radebaugh would think he'd snitched part o' the loot—whatever it is—if he opened the thing."

Vince took his horse to the liveryman's, went for something to eat.

Night came and he watched the livery stable for Ricardo Oliveros. Ricardo was late and when he showed up the owner of the stable turned things over to him and went home. Callahan walked over to the stable and confronted the Mexican.

"It'll be to your advantage, Ric," the cowman said, "if you'll tell me what your folks done with that skull."

Oliveros looked frightened. He shrugged. "Bot my Carmencita,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

señor, she ees not tell me so moch. She say only that our leetle Pedro bring heem in, and that he ees wan strange great curse, and that she have make the *muchacho* put heem back joost where he get heem." Again Ricardo shrugged. "More as that, señor, I do not know."

"Where is your family now, Ric?"

"At the *casa* of her oncle, the *Tio* Juan Fuerza, which he have wan leetle sheeps ranch east to San Sebastian, señor. She weel come back *mañana*. At thees time, she tell me, the skoll of the curse weel be far away."

"How the hell could the thing be far away unless somebody took it?" Callahan demanded impatiently. "I thought the *muchacho* was to put it back where he got it. Where *did* he get it?"

Again Oliveros shrugged. "Thees all I know, señor. Who understand womans?"

Before Callahan could think of anything else to say, there was the staccato rattle of hoofs on the bridge that crossed the creek, down the street a short stone's throw. He turned to the wide doorway and peered into the semi-darkness. A lone horseman was coming, and soon Callahan recognized him as Sheriff Bill Dornbush.

"Here, Bill," Callahan called, and

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Street & Smith's Western Story, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1945.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Western Story, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publishers, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; *editor*, John Burr, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; *managing editors*, none; *business managers*, none.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., a corporation owned through stock holdings by Gerald H. Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Ormond V. Gould, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Allen L. Grammer, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

H. W. RALSTON, Vice President.
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1945. Edward F. Kasmire, Notary Public No. 455, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1947.)

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the officer reined in before him a few seconds later.

"Wondered what had become of you, Vince," Dornbush said, and dismounted. "Me and a couple deputies combed the country and couldn't find any sign of you or Granville Orr. I—"

"Leave your hoss here, Bill, and let's go get you some supper and have us a powwow," the younger man cut in. "Maybe you can riddle this thing out. I sure cain't."

The old sheriff couldn't, either. A skull that had vanished up near the hills, to show up as a plaything of children here in Buckskin Glory, and now had vanished again, to go far away . . .

"Without benefit of human hands, it almost seems. Why, Vince, it's plumb creepy," Dornbush said over his coffee. "By the way, I had a telegram tellin' me to look out for two prison busters, and the description fits the jiggers who calls themselves Ben Radebaugh and Granville Orr. Both of 'em desperate and mighty dangerous, says the telegram. But you'd already figured that. What you think we better do next, Vince?"

Callahan didn't answer. Across the street the big combination saloon, dance hall and gambling emporium had grown noisy, but Vince, deep in thought, was hardly conscious of the din. Sheriff Dornbush, his supper finished, got to his feet. Mechanically Callahan followed suit.

Jim Pickett spied them as they were leaving the restaurant and hurried to shake hands with the old sheriff. Then the marshal turned to Callahan.

"Nothin' new, Vince?"

"Wonder what's happened over there," Callahan muttered, and nodded toward the big frame building across the street.

V

A minute before the place had been alive with hilarity that very nearly drowned out the music. It was now fast becoming as silent as a prairie graveyard. Jim Pickett had found a big six-shooter to replace the one that Radebaugh and Orr had taken from him. He loosened the weapon in its leather.

"Trouble o' some kind, certain," Pickett said. "Let's go over."

The three men stopped short in the main entrance.

"For gosh sakes," Vince Callahan breathed, "will you look at that!"

Under the big, hanging oil lamps the dance-hall girls and their partners stood frozen. The eyes of everyone in the place were focused on a scraggly-bearded, gnomelike little old man, the desert-rat prospector type, who had mounted the bar midway and stood there with whiskey-bright squinted eyes, in a sort of Atlas pose, both clawlike hands holding high over his head—a ghastly, gleaming skull of silver!

It was the drinking little old-timer's idea of a good prank. "*Woo!*" he creaked, and it was somehow unearthly. "*Woo!* The ghosts air a-goin' to git all o' you sinners! *Woo-oo-oo!*"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Pinch me and see if I'm dreamin'," Vince muttered. "What the hell, maybe I'm just seein' things—"

The thunderous blast of a six-shooter sounded and the bright skull jumped out of the little man's hands, bounced off the bar and fell behind it. The bullet went on to wreck the big back-bar mirror and there was the tinkling of falling shattered glass. Instantly then came a series of shots. When they died away all the lights were out and dungeon blackness swooped down.

"Hold it!" Sheriff Bill Dornbush bellowed. "Stay where you are, everybody—don't move!"

Vince Callahan rushed through the bedlam toward the space behind the bar and the skull. He collided with two fighting, cursing men and even in the thick darkness he knew it was Granville Orr and Ben Radebaugh. He had snaked out the long-barreled Radebaugh gun and now he struck out at the man nearest him.

The deep-bass voice of Granville Orr bellowed painfully and a streak of orange flame stopped at Callahan's left sleeve, the bullet scorching his arm. Callahan fired then and Orr sucked in a gasping breath and cursed.

"Come on, Gran—this way—*I got it!*" shouted Radebaugh.

Callahan lunged at them, stumbled and struck his head against something and for the moment was so dazed that he lost all sense of direction in the dungeonlike blackness. But he forced his faculties to work and yelled:

"Dornbush! Pickett! Star-faced bay and a big calico—somewhere at the back—watch 'em and you can nail Orr and Radebaugh . . ."

Holding to the inner edge of the long bar, Callahan made his way to an end of it. Luckily it was the front end. Then through a window he saw a light across the street. He staggered to the main entrance and out, shook his head and cleared it.

"Dornbush!" he shouted.

As though in response there came from the alleyway behind the big frame building the roar of a six-shooter, followed instantly by the voice of Jim Pickett:

"Get 'em up or I'll—"

Two shots cut that off short. With the Radebaugh gun ready in his hand, Callahan ran around the building toward the alleyway. Two figures materialized ahead of him, coming slowly and with caution, stooped low. From the darkness beyond them came Sheriff Dornbush's voice:

"Where'd they go, Jim? I thought I got one of 'em—hey, Vince, where are you?"

Callahan didn't answer. He dropped to one knee, the better to see the two men who were stealing toward him, and leveled the long-barreled six-shooter.

"Paws up—" he ordered when they were within a rod of him. "Up high!"

The flashes from two gun muzzles were blinding, but Callahan was under the flying hot lead. He fired so quickly that the three explosions were almost one. Sheriff Bill Dorn-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bush and the Buckskin Glory town marshal came running up.

"That you, Vince?"

Callahan spoke rapidly. "Yeah, The jiggers slipped by me somehow. They've got the skull. Better hustle back to their hosses. I'll go around the buildin' the other way."

But, search as they would, they found neither hair nor hide of Ben Radebaugh or Granville Orr.

Other lamps had been lighted inside, and the crowd had grown quiet. Jim Pickett pressed cowboy and miner friends into service looking for the two outlaws. It was to no avail.

"No horses are gone," Callahan said to Dornbush. "They'd never get far on foot, and I still think they're holed up somewhere in town. I'm pretty sure I hit one of 'em. Here we been wonderin' where they are and they're right under our noses. Musta got wind that the little old-timer had the skull and trailed him here. But where did *he* get it?"

"Search me. . . . I felt sure I hit one of 'em, too," Dornbush said, "though shootin' in the dark is always tricky. They shot my hat off, there in the alley, and nicked an ear for Jim Pickett. We better scatter now, Vince, and lay low and watch."

Callahan kept an eye on the bay and the calico. When the moon rose, he found cover in a clump of bushes on a vacant lot behind the big building. By midnight riders, singly and in groups, were leaving the hitch rails in front.

At four in the morning, the place closed, the lights went out, and silence fell over the tough little town.

The watched horses in the alleyway had long been restless. They moved occasionally, but each time stepped on the trailing reins and were stopped. In spite of himself Vince Callahan became a little drowsy. From far off he heard the lonesome sound of a coyote baying at the moon . . .

The next sound he heard came from somewhere above him and he cut his eye upward and to the right. The building wall there was in half shadow. Against that wall was an outside stairway leading to the second floor. Callahan's eyes made out movement on the stairs. Then, suddenly, he knew.

Radebaugh and Orr had taken refuge either on the second floor or on the flat roof, and they were coming down now!

Callahan cursed himself, Bill Dornbush and Jim Pickett for not having considered the possibilities of that stairway. But like the building itself it was paintless, and had been invisible in the darkness.

He rose with his gun ready. It was an unwise move, for the two men saw him, and in that same second's time they began shooting. He dropped flat and returned the fire. A bullet sprayed his face with sand that stung like birdshot, and another bullet furrowed his hip. But he kept thumbing the gun hammer. The hot slugs kept coming. Then he heard Ben Radebaugh gasping:

"He . . . got me, Gran—" and there was the heavy thump of a body on the ground below.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Put 'em up, Orr!" yelled Callahan. "If you don't I'll kill you!"

Yet again Granville Orr fired. It was the six-shooter's last loaded cartridge. Callahan's weapon snapped on an empty. Orr heard the futile click, knew what it meant and came stumbling down the stairs; he fell, rose and ran, staggering, toward his horse. Callahan went forward and closed with the tall, bony man almost under the belly of the star-faced bay, and swung the long barrel.

Granville Orr slumped to the ground and lay still. From the vicinity of the stairs came a bellowing roar—Ben Radebaugh's final shot—and Vince Callahan also wilted to the ground and lay there still in the moonlight.

"Looks like the three has killed each other," Bill Dornbush said with deep concern, when he arrived with the Buckskin Glory town marshal a minute later. He flung an oath at the inquiring heads that were poking from upstairs windows. "Vince was a fine boy, and it's just too bad. . . . What did you say, Jim?"

"I said here's the silver skull," repeated Jim Pickett, "layin' here almost under the stairs. The top is off, and the thing is empty."

Though Callahan was not dead, he heard none of that. Days passed before he heard anything at all, save in feverish delirium. But his senses, when at last they did come back, came back in a rush. He saw that he lay in his own bed in his V-in-C ranchhouse, and that sitting close by

MIDWEST
RADIO CORPORATION
Celebrates Its
25th
Anniversary Year

The year 1945 completes a quarter-century of pioneering and achievement in the field of radio for Midwest. Few manufacturers can match this record of continuous radio manufacture or Midwest's faithful adherence to high quality standards.

Although present production is exclusively devoted to the manufacture of radio and radar instruments for our Armed Forces, Midwest is planning new and finer radios for tomorrow.

Plan to Buy Your Postwar Radio Direct from the Midwest Factory

That's how thousands of Midwest Radio owners, for 25 years, have enjoyed the finest in radio . . . and at

SAVINGS UP TO 50%
WRITE FOR CATALOG NOW!

There is already a heavy advance demand for the Midwest Radio Catalog to be issued after Victory. To be sure that you will receive one of the first copies, we urge you to send us your request TODAY. Write direct to Mr. A. G. Hoffman, President.

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
DEPT. 42-AA CINCINNATI 2, OHIO

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were old Sheriff Bill Dornbush and two of his range riders. There were bandages on his head, one arm, and a hip, and he smelled like a drugstore.

"Well, Bill," he muttered presently, "how's tricks?"

"*Bueno,*" the grizzled lawman answered with a wide grin, "No doctor in Buckskin, so we had to bring you to the county seat for a trephine operation on your head, where a bullet had busted the bone a little. You'll soon be all right, the doc says. Orr and Radebaugh was shot up so bad they oughta died, but didn't. They're in my jail with special officers guardin' 'em. They—"

"What was in that doggoned tobacco jar, Bill?"

Dornbush kept grinning. "Forty thousand dollars in big banknotes, is all! The two jiggers had took the money out and hid it in the bottoms of their boots just before we caught up with 'em. Whole thing belonged to an old miser hoss rancher up in Montana. Radebaugh and Orr shipped it by freight to get it out o' their hands, like you guessed, before they was arrested and sent up. Coupla months later, they broke out.

"Well, Vince, that was some skull! It moved from up near the hills to Buckskin Glory without a hand touchin' it. Then it moved four miles below Buckskin the same way. The little old-timer picked it up and brought it back to Buckskin. He tried to open it, but the screw top was on so tight he couldn't, and then he got drunk and forgot about what might be inside. He—"

"Just a minute, Bill," Callahan broke in. "How could the thing move itself that way? Don't kid me!"

Dornbush laughed. "Very simple, Vince. Remember that old white shirt Orr had on, with the skull wedged inside? Well, after your bullet creased him that first night and he was ridin' hard up the creek, that old shirt split and the skull fell out and rolled into the water. It just about floated and the creek carried it to Buckskin where the *muchacho* found it. Then after the Mexican woman made the button put it back into the creek, it floated on until the old-timer happened to find it. Orr must've figured it would float. Get it now, Vince?"

"Yeah, think I do." Wearily the young cowman closed his eyes. "With me fixin' to lose my big ranch because I cain't afford windmill wells for water, ain't it a shame that I don't get anything out o' this?"

"The hell you don't," Bill Dornbush said. "I forgot to tell you that the old miser hoss man had published a reward of half the forty thousand for the return of the other half, and there's twenty thousand dollars waitin' for you in the bank right now! That silver skull brought you luck, after all."

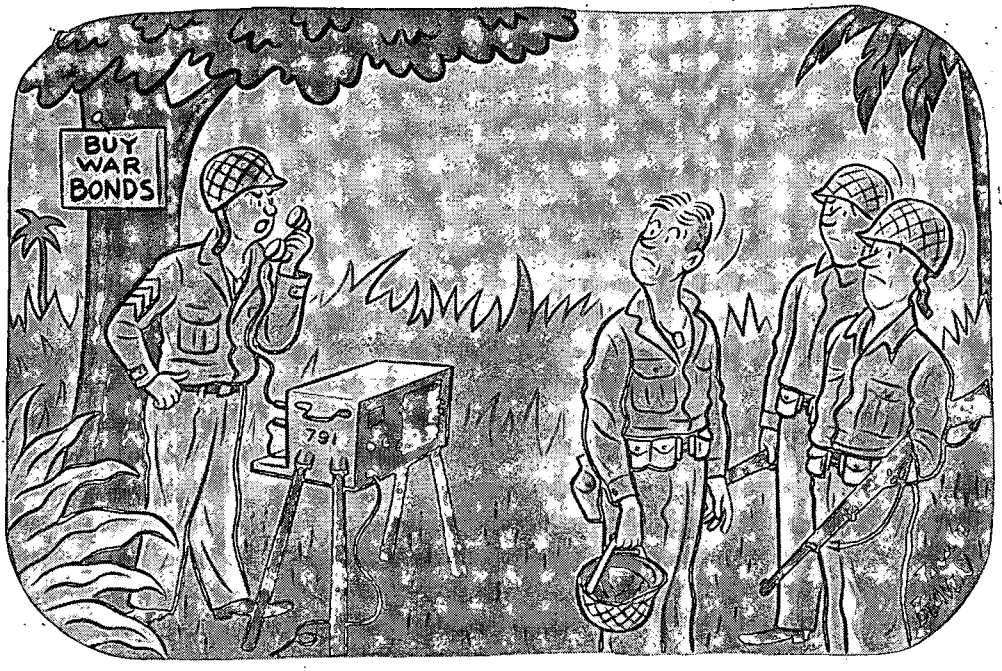
THE END

Anwers to puzzle on page 94.

1. elk 2. ranger 3. bait 4. hardware 5. ditch 6. shakedown 7. bench 8. anvil 9. ford 10. malpais 11. backfire 12. flank 13. breed 14. headstall 15. muleteer

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LIGHTER MOMENTS with
fresh Eveready Batteries



"Which one of youse guys is 'cutie-pie'?"

"EVEREADY" No. 6 Dry Cells continue to provide dependable power for the vital field telephone equipment of our Armed Forces.

But you'll be glad to know they are available in increasing quantities for civilian use—fresh, *full-powered,* long-lived as always. Ask for them at your dealer's now.

Let's get the Jap—and get it over!

EVEREADY
TRADE-MARK

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nice evening the boss is lining up for himself"

NEXT to a companion like Skippy, the pleasantest prop we can suggest for *your* fireside evening is a Calvert highball.

For here's a pre-war quality whiskey that's definitely *the real thing*... so smooth and mellow it simply can't be imitated!

Little wonder that year after year, Calvert is reported "the whiskey most often asked for by name".

Why not curl up *tonight* with your pipe, book and a Calvert highball? But be sure it's Calvert... if you want *the real thing*.

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE Calvert

It's the Real Thing

Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.

Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED